



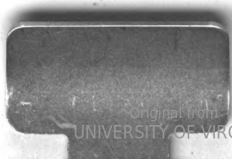
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The Way of the Wild

THE WAY OF THE WILD

BY
HERBERT RAVENEL SASS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL



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FOREWORD

The woods and the fields, the marshes and the waters are a vast theater where many dramas are enacted. Yet, for the most part, these are hidden from human eyes. Only now and then do we get a glimpse of a tragic climax; only rarely can we read in the sand the details of some perilous encounter. We have made the wild folk fear us. Hence, though they may be all around us, they hold themselves aloof and do not willingly permit us to follow from beginning to end the record of their lives.

Yet all who go into the woods know how dramatic those lives often are, how full of thrilling adventure. The careful naturalist, setting down only what he has actually seen of some wild animal, realizes at the end how inadequate, how incomplete his record is. It contains much of great value. It is all true. But it is a fragment or series of fragments. It omits much that undoubtedly happens, much of interest and importance. It is not a picture of that animal's life.

That is why the naturalist or student of wild nature may, without apology, make use of the form



known as the animal story. He employs the animal story for precisely the same reason which induces the conscientious student of human nature to employ the human story—because, in many ways and upon many occasions, it is the best means of presenting the truth.

Thus, the animal story, properly conceived, has a legitimate and important place in the literature of nature. There is, moreover, one great practical consideration in its favor: namely, the fact that it has proved its power to awaken in thousands of men and women a keen and sympathetic interest in the wild folk who are our neighbors out-of-doors. If there were nothing else to be said for it, this alone would suffice.

This book is a book of animal stories. If there are errors in it, as doubtless there must be, the same thing is true of nearly all the books that man has written.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOREWORD	V
LOTOR THE LUCKY	3
THE BACHELORS OF DEVILHEAD	35
NORTHWIND	63
RUSTY ROUSTABOUT	97
THE QUEST OF THE EAGLE STONE	131
BLACK BULL OF AHOWHE	163
THE WAR OF THE KINGS	195
THE KING OF THE RIVER	217
THE PRISONERS OF HALF-ACRE	255
LYNX LUCIFER	287



Lotor the Lucky

THE WAY OF THE WILD

LOTOR THE LUCKY

ALL evening thick gray mists had drifted low above the island woods before a brisk north-east breeze; but toward midnight the wind had lulled, and now the moon hung high and round in a sky where no shred of cloud floated. The air had been swept dry and clean. Very faint and far, yet singularly clear, seemed the voices of the September night; voices of many different kinds, dropping softly down through the still moonlit spaces.

Mat Norman, his back against the trunk of a laurel oak at the edge of a small meadow of rushes, listened eagerly. The muffled thunder of surf breaking along a barrier beach a half mile away made a sort of background for the voices falling from the upper air and seemed somehow to enhance their distinctness.

Norman recognized many of them—the metallic chirps of ricebirds, the guttural “quok-quok-quok” of night herons or Indian pullets, the mellow calls of plover and curlew, the high-pitched cries of green

4 THE WAY OF THE WILD

herons. A long time he listened, marveling at the vast numbers of the migrating birds streaming southward through the night along high invisible air roads, guided by the boom of the surf on the lonely beaches of the coast. Then, suddenly, another sound fixed his attention.

It was no more than the cracking of a twig. Yet Norman, accustomed to nocturnal vigils in the haunts of wild things, knew that it was significant. He hoped for a buck of the sea-island race of deer; but the wayfarer that presently appeared at the opening of the narrow trail through the rushes was a raccoon, a very small raccoon, having only the stump of a tail. In the white moonlight Norman could see plainly, could distinguish nearly every detail.

“Lotor the Lucky,” he muttered, smiling; “Lotor the Wily One, the Tailless One. Lotor the Little, roaming a long way from home. Now I wonder——”

He broke off suddenly. A small dark shape darted along the path through the rushes straight toward the spot where the little raccoon waited motionless; and above it and behind it another dark shape planed swiftly, soundlessly downward. Scarcely two feet in front of the raccoon, the horned owl dropped upon his victim, and in the same instant Lotor the Lucky leaped forward. A squeal, a growl, a brief violent

fluttering of strong wings beating the ground and the grass; then, as silently as he had fallen on his prey, the big owl floated upward, empty-clawed. An instant he hovered ten feet above the spot where the raccoon crouched, growling, on the quivering body of a young marsh rabbit. Next moment the owl was gone.

Mat Norman, invisible against the black trunk of his oak, grinned delightedly.

“Quick work, Lotor the Lucky,” he exclaimed under his breath; “quick work and your usual luck. It’s a smart coon that can make a horned owl catch his supper for him. . . . Hello! What now?”

Behind and just above the raccoon the impalpable air had suddenly taken form. A ghostly, big-headed shape hung there momentarily, then dropped apparently upon the raccoon’s back. Wide, powerful wings buffeted Lotor the Lucky; long, needle-pointed claws ripped and raked his hide; a piercing, strangling scream stabbed his ears. Taken utterly by surprise, the little coon leaped sideways out of the path and into the rushes. When, a moment or two later, his quick wits had taken stock of the situation and he bounced out into the path again to reclaim his booty, the big owl had already lifted the rabbit fifteen feet into the air.

Mat Norman laughed softly as his imagination

6 THE WAY OF THE WILD

pictured the expression of Lotor's whiskered countenance.

"By thunder!" he said to himself. "That's an owl worth knowing. I'll get acquainted with the old pirate and keep tab on him. And to start with, I'll name him Eyes o' Flame, the Harrier of the Night."

He smiled and repeated the imposing title. Norman was a young man then and he had a young man's fancy for resounding names. Moreover, for an instant he had seen two great round orbs which glowed in the moonlight like live coals. The name that he had chosen pleased him.

Three afternoons later, an hour before sunset, Eyes o' Flame sat in a low dense cedar at the edge of a wide sea marsh and looked out over the level green expanse. Unless something especially alluring tempted him, the horned owl would not begin his hunting for two hours or more. But he was wide awake and fully alert; and his big yellow black-centered eyes, glaring fixedly under the two tall feather tufts on top of his head, kept grim and ceaseless watch upon the wild peoples of the lonely salt flats.

The flood tide, pouring in through narrow inlets between the barrier islands and sweeping silently

along the deep meandering marsh creeks, brought with it incalculable hordes of shrimp and mullet. Twenty feet in front of the owl's cedar the marsh grass fell away, enclosing a bare space of sandy mud pitted with shallow holes and traversed by crooked, irregular gullies. Already the rising waters had converted this open space into a marsh-bordered pond from two inches to a foot in depth—a small tidal lagoon packed and crammed with life.

The horned owl waited and watched, his luminous eyes scanning the muddy margins where the water lapped amid the close-growing marsh blades. A flock of fifty-two snowy egrets, winging slowly toward their roosting place, dropped down to the teeming shallows, too tempting to be passed by, despite the lateness of the hour. With languid interest the big owl watched them at their fishing—slim, graceful, immaculate, striding swiftly here and there through water that covered their golden feet and four inches of their clean black legs. To right and left the long, straight javelin bills flashed downward, lifted again, jerked spasmodically in the air as the mandibles manipulated the shrimp to loosen the horny head parts, snapped shut once more, poised, aimed, flashed down upon another victim.

To Eyes o' Flame all this was of no importance; but he observed with some quickening of interest that now and then an egret leaped suddenly upward

8 THE WAY OF THE WILD

and did a little dance in the water as a passing crab struck with clashing claws at the tall bird's slender legs. Egrets and shrimp were of no consequence in the horned owl's scheme of things, but crabs sometimes played a certain part in his hunting, and this evidence of their abundance was worth noting. More closely than ever, the round yellow orbs searched the marsh-bordered margins of the pool; but minute after minute passed uneventfully, and Eyes o' Flame's gaze strayed hither and yonder, taking in many things, yet finding nothing to stir him to action.

Presently, low above the marsh, swept an army of black-and-white skimmers, flying side by side in a long double rank several hundred yards across its front, their taper wings rhythmically fanning the air, their scissorslike bills gleaming red in the soft light. Eyes o' Flame watched them curiously as they passed. So large an array of skimmers was a rare sight on the marshes, though not so rare on the barrier beach a half mile away, where, in late summer and fall, the scissors-bills might sometimes be seen in hosts of many hundreds as they passed up or down the strand, journeying from one inlet sand bar to another.

The big owl's head was turned to watch the departing skimmer army. He could no longer see the pool or its denizens. Yet suddenly, with such swift-

ness that a man's eye could not have followed the motion, his head pivoted on his shoulders so that it faced the other way. The yellow eyes glowed with a fiercer light; the tall, hornlike ear tufts rose stiffly erect; the whole burly, rather fluffy body of the owl seemed to tighten and grow tense and hard. It must have been a sound that had warned him; yet this sound, if sound there was, could not have been heard at that distance by the keenest human ear.

The egrets fishing in the pool did not hear it. A clapper rail, walking along the margin close to the encircling wall of marsh grass, continued her walk undisturbed. The big blue crabs, moving about in the shallows, failed to take alarm. But Eyes o' Flame's marvelous ears had made no mistake.

Out of the marsh, precisely at the spot upon which the owl's eyes were fixed, bounded a slim, long, dark brown shape. Its first leap carried it with a splash into water which all but covered its short legs. Its second leap carried it still deeper, to a place where an instant before the claws of a crab had appeared momentarily, striking at something on the surface. Its third leap bore it shoreward again, snarling with anger; for the crab, warned by that first splash, had dodged and darted away in a cloud of muddy water.

Another half second and the mink would have regained the shelter of the tall marsh grass; but in that half second silent wings lowered over him, long

10 THE WAY OF THE WILD

claws as sharp as needles and almost as hard as steel clutched his nape and drove deep into his furry throat. With hardly a movement of his pinions, Eyes o' Flame sailed onward and upward. Long before the big owl had reached the ancient live oak which was his favorite feeding station, the lithe brown form trailing from his talons had ceased its struggles.

The old oak stood in the heart of dense junglelike woods and thickets covering a small island in the marshes midway between a much larger island, which was almost a part of the mainland, and a low, narrow barrier isle along the edge of the sea. The small densely wooded island in the midst of the green marsh flats had been Eyes o' Flames headquarters for months. Its almost impenetrable thickets rendered it a safe refuge so far as human enemies were concerned, while on it and all around it the great horned owl found abundance of game.

Almost in its center was a small fresh-water pool in the middle of a wet meadow covered thickly with tall olive-green rushes, growing in dense clumps and standing as high as a man's head; and everywhere through these rushes wound the trails and runways of the short-eared brown marsh rabbits which were Eyes o' Flame's staple prey. The woods and thickets swarmed with field rats; in the belt of reeds and other water growths around the island's rim

other rodents abounded; in the wilderness of marsh grass stretching on every side hundreds of clapper rails made their homes. On all these Eyes o' Flame levied tribute, now and again varying his fare by hunting quail or robbing some plantation henroost on the larger inhabited island across the boggy tidal plains. Yet, better than all these, Eyes o' Flame's whimsical palate loved the mink; and often, in the dusk and in the dark, he haunted the shadowy margins of shallow pools and creeks where the minks of the marshes sought the big blue crabs which came in from the inlets and the sea with the flooding tide.

On this September evening the horned owl was in luck. He had caught his mink without hunting for it—caught it in daylight, before the time for his hunting had arrived. This was a stroke of fortune; he need not hunt that night unless he chose to do so, for here was his dinner ready for the eating. Yet as his soft wings bore him noiselessly toward the old oak in the island woods, Eyes o' Flame, despite his passion for mink meat, was conscious of no eager desire for the feast.

Perhaps he had dined more sumptuously than usual the night before. Perhaps the sluggishness of his appetite was due to the fact that sunset was not his accustomed hour for dining, but, on the contrary, the hour at which he prepared to set forth in search of game. At any rate, having reached his dining

table—a crotch of the oak where three stout limbs diverged—he did not proceed to rend and devour his prey, but instead stood idly upon the mink's carcass for perhaps a quarter of an hour while the dusk deepened round him.

At last his barred and mottled tawny pinions opened and he planed outward and downward from the oak, swerved in the air and sailed buoyantly up to a bulky nest of sticks, bark and Spanish moss near the top of a pine. In this nest—the deserted home of a pair of red-shouldered hawks—he deposited the body of the mink. Then he spread his velvet wings again and faded into the gloom.

He had been gone perhaps three minutes when a lump on one of the limbs of the live oak moved. For a quarter of an hour that lump had remained utterly motionless, except for an almost imperceptible movement of its sides which proved that the lump breathed; but throughout that quarter of an hour two beady black orbs had watched Eyes o' Flame as he perched in the crotch of the oak—watched him eagerly yet patiently, calmly yet perhaps vindictively.

Lotor the Lucky was very small, but he was very wise. When he was three months old a cottonmouth moccasin had bitten him. He had recovered, but somehow the venom had retarded his growth. Seasoned veteran though he was, rich in woods lore,

expert in all the essential arts of forest life, he was a poor thing to look at—a scraggy runt of a raccoon, scarcely more than half his proper size, boasting only a mere remnant of a tail, lacking four toes which steel traps had taken, walking always with a limp because another trap had crushed a hind foot. How he lost his tail is another story and does not matter. It was at the opposite end of his person that his brain was situated; and the important thing about Lotor was his brain.

That brain was busy now. It had been busy from the moment when Lotor's sharp eyes discerned the great horned owl winging silently toward the oak with prey hanging from his talons. In that moment the little raccoon, returning along one of the oak's main limbs after a raid on certain clusters of wild grapes, had frozen into absolute immobility. Thirty feet from him Eyes o' Flame came to rest in the oak; and Lotor, watching through a screen of leaves which hid him from the owl, waited with that vast patience which was a basic ingredient of his wisdom.

There was stored away in Lotor's brain considerable knowledge of horned owls. When this owl did not begin at once to devour the prey which he had taken, the little raccoon knew that it might be worth his while to keep watch from his ambush; and while he watched, his sharp eyes shot quick glances to right and left, searching the surrounding trees.

14 THE WAY OF THE WILD

When, a few minutes later, he spied the deserted hawks' nest in the pine, the discovery served to fortify his patience. He felt fairly confident now that he knew what the owl would do, and he was not surprised in the slightest when presently Eyes o' Flame flew with his prey to the abandoned nest, which he occasionally used as a storehouse, lingered there a half second, then departed empty-clawed for his night's hunting.

Lotor the Lucky waited a few minutes for safety's sake. On the ground he stood in no fear of horned owls; on the slim trunk of that pine, fifty feet above the ground, the steel-clawed, great-winged hunter of the night would have him at a disadvantage. One of the things that Lotor had learned about these monarchs of the owl tribe was the fact that they varied much in strength and courage. He had been living on the little island in the marshes only about a week, having come there from a much larger island where his tribe abounded; but already he had had one encounter with this horned owl which had given the wily old coon an eloquent hint of the big bird's daring.

Hence, for some three minutes after Eyes o' Flame had disappeared, Lotor remained a mere inanimate knob on the rugged limb of the oak. Then the knob stirred and became again a small stump-tailed raccoon which moved swiftly along the

oak limb and down the tree's massive trunk. A quarter of an hour later—for more than once he had paused to listen keenly and look about him—Lotor's eager black eyes peered over the rim of the hawk's nest in the pine.

What he saw there at first pleased, then disappointed him. His prize lay where he expected to find it; but it was not the prize which he had hoped for—a young marsh rabbit. The victim that Eyes o' Flame had left in his storehouse was a creature which Lotor knew well, but upon which he was not accustomed to prey, because, in the first place, he had never succeeded in catching a mink and had learned long ago that it was waste of time to stalk or pursue them. Yet having climbed fifty feet for this supper, he was not disposed to reject it hastily. He took the brown carcass delicately in his jaws, and with another quick, apprehensive glance around him, backed over the rim of the nest.

Lotor the Lucky was halfway down the pine when a strange thing happened. As suddenly as though a rifle bullet had touched his spine, he loosed his hold on the tree and dropped, his body twisting frantically, his feet clawing the air. Into the top of a low, dense, wide-spreading cassena bush at the base of the pine he fell with a crash that shattered the silence of the island woods; and as the stiff, small-leaved twigs of the bush engulfed him and

closed over him, a great dim shape, wide-winged and savage-eyed, hammered with mighty pinions at the leafy gates of his refuge and struck long trenchant talons deep into the barricade of twigs.

Lotor the Lucky, somewhat disheveled and rather breathless, felt the needle point of one of those talons lightly scratch his hide. It was a mere pin prick and it did the coon no harm. But it was vivid proof of how narrowly he had escaped, and he sprawled motionless for a minute or two amid the inner branches of the cassena before recovering his equanimity. Then he jumped lightly to the ground and stood for an instant considering, the mink still hanging from his jaws. Above and around him the stiff interlacing twigs and branches formed a barrier which Eyes o' Flame could never penetrate; but Lotor the Lucky, now that he had the solid ground under him again, no longer feared the owl, and for a moment he was on the point of stepping boldly out into the open.

The impulse passed quickly. Always, Lotor had found discretion the better part of valor. It had been his settled rule to avoid fights of all kinds, and he had won through to old age because Nature, as if to make amends for giving him so small a body, had endowed him with cunning beyond the cunning of his kind and senses sharper than those of most raccoons—senses so sharp that somehow his ears had

warned him of the big owl's unexpected return, although those velvet wings had seemed as silent as the wings of a ghost. So Lotor the Lucky, who might better have been named Lotor the Discreet, remained for the present within his cassena fortress and gave his attention to the booty for which he had nearly paid a high price; and presently he discovered to his disgust that he had risked his hide and his neck for nothing.

Had there been water at hand in which he could have washed the mink, he might have eaten at least a part of it; for the raccoon is loath to swallow meat which has not been dabbled and soaked in water with his own paws. But even if he had been able to prepare it in the approved way, Lotor would probably have left most of this carcass to the woods scavengers. As it was, he left nearly all of it. It was meat strange to his palate, tough, stringy and rank; and, accustomed as he was to the choicest delicacies of the woods, the marshes and the creeks, he ate only the soft inner parts, then lost interest altogether. Giving the mangled, furry body a last contemptuous push with his nose, he ambled to the thicket's edge and thrust his sharp-pointed, black-spectacled face out through the leafy barricade.

The moon, now three nights past the full, had not yet risen high enough to send its pallid radiance down into the woods; but Lotor's eyes could see in

the dark almost or quite as well as in the light; and, after a few minutes' inspection, he felt fairly confident that the horned owl had gone on about his business. Sharp and clear above the low thunder of the surf on the barrier beach a half mile away, the voices of invisible myriads—ricebirds and warblers, herons and plovers—floated down to Lotor's ears. Again to-night the far-called armies of the migrating birds were passing southward down the long, lonely coast, bound for their winter quarters in the tropics.

In Lotor's brain, as he listened, an idea was born. Those voices dropping down through the darkness were the voices of the fall. The long Low Country summer was over. The cool crisp nights of autumn were at hand. For Lotor and all his kind that lived in the jungly woods along the sea, the coming of the new season was the signal for a change of habit.

From now on, as the nights grew cooler, the whiskered, ring-tailed folk of the island woods would roam more widely and more adventurously. From now on their tracks, almost like the handprints of little men, would be seen in many places where for months no trail of a raccoon had been found. Lotor, listening to those autumnal voices, felt within him the impulse to roam; and gradually this impulse took definite form. The night had just begun. There was ample time for a visit to a cer-

tain spot, unvisited for months, but rich with succulent memories.

A half hour later, Eyes o' Flame, the horned owl, motionless on the top of a tall dead cedar at the edge of the marshes, saw a gray hump-backed shape ambling like a tiny bear along an abandoned causeway leading across the marshy flats toward the ocean beach. To the great owl's eyes the night was more transparent than the day. At once he recognized his foe—the little tailless coon that had come to live in his woods, the thief that had raided his storehouse and stolen his milk. Yet Eyes o' Flame did not move. Bold as he was, he was prudent also, and it was not his habit to trifle rashly with raccoons unless there was some compelling reason for doing so or unless conditions gave him an advantage. Some night perhaps he would catch Lotor again high in the air on the slender trunk of a tree, where he could not meet the big owl's lightninglike onset. Then there would be a reckoning. Eyes o' Flame bided his time.

So Lotor the Lucky passed on along the causeway toward the sea, unaware of the grim, hostile orbs that watched him go; and presently he came without mishap or adventure to the back beach of the small barrier isle to which the causeway led. There he paused for a few moments to take stock of his surroundings.

The tide was very high. On both sides of the causeway the waters had spread far and wide across the marshy flats; and the barrier isle itself, the lowest and narrowest on the coast and for most of its length bare of trees, was now nothing more than a low ridge of sand, on one side of which the ocean broke in hissing phosphorescent foam while on the other stretched the flooded marshes.

Lotor did not altogether like the look of things. Yet he had seen tides as high as this, and even higher, and always after a while the waters had subsided. The little coon had a certain practical understanding of tides—the fruit of long experience. He knew that although they sometimes rose much higher than at other times, there were limits which they never passed. Obviously, this tide had nearly reached its limit and would soon begin to recede. This meant that long before daylight conditions at the spot which he intended to visit would be exactly suited to his purpose. Forgetting his misgivings, he set out at a good pace along the sandy ridge above the surf.

Lotor, for all his wisdom, could not know that a hundred miles offshore a mighty hurricane was raging. He could not know that this far-off storm was driving the waters of the sea against the Low Country coast, pushing them higher and higher, so that, although the flood tide still had two hours

more to run, the normal high-water mark had already been passed. There was nothing to warn Lotor of these things, for the clear, almost windless night held no hint of menace; and though he could not help noticing that a heavier surf than usual thundered along the ocean front, he attached no significance to it until the continued rise of the waters forced it upon his attention. By that time he had traveled more than half the length of the barrier island, heading for the small inlet near which he expected to feast on oysters. A dramatic discovery woke him to his peril.

Ahead of him the sandy ridge dipped and flattened. Suddenly Lotor saw that, where once dry sands had stretched between clumps of low dunes, the sea had broken through. Before him surged a seething torrent some fifty yards in width, where great ocean breakers, tossing their white crests as if in triumph, hurled themselves clear across the narrow island and into the quiet waters covering the marshes behind.

Instantly Lotor turned and made off at his best speed along the back trail. Within a half mile he halted, perplexed, even a little frightened. Since he had passed, the ocean had broken through in another place. His retreat was cut off.

It was an hour after this that Lotor came to a disagreeable decision. He would have to swim

across the inundated marshes to one of the wooded islands behind the barrier beach. The little coon was a practiced swimmer, but he did not enjoy the prospect of so long a swim as this one would be—a swim of a mile or more across open spaces too brightly illumined by the moon to suit his cautious spirit. Yet there were no terrors in the placid sheltered waters which he must cross comparable with the white tumultuous terror roaring just behind him and threatening each moment to engulf him.

The barrier isle was disintegrating under him. As long as he could he had held his place on a knoll of the sandy ridge, still hoping that after a while the tide would reach its crest and begin to recede. But closer and closer came those rearing white-maned chargers of the surf; louder and louder roared their savage voices; more and more often long tongues of white water shot forward from the onrushing ranks of the breakers and, swishing past his knoll on either side, swept clear over the ridge. It was plain at last that in a little while Lotor's knoll must go; and, wisely, Lotor made up his mind that he would go first.

Sidling down the slope of the knoll away from the ocean, he waded delicately across a submerged carpet of short, jointed, salt grass and dropped suddenly almost out of sight into still water too deep for wading. Then, with only his head and a little

of his shoulders showing, he began his long journey across the flooded marshes.

Lotor the Lucky, being much smaller than most raccoons, was also weaker and less enduring. Piti-fully small he seemed on the face of those wide waters under the moon. The eyes of a careless or unpracticed man would not have recognized him as a raccoon, for at a little distance in that dim decep-tive light he resembled a floating fragment of water-soaked driftwood; but if a man had watched closely he would have perceived that this driftwood frag-ment was moving not with the tide but against it or across it, and that twice within the space of a few minutes it changed its course.

Presently it changed its direction for a third time. Lotor, far from land now, was not his normal, cool, calculating self. In this test which confronted him, his cunning, upon which he always relied, was of no avail. It was muscle that he needed—strength and endurance for a long unremitting effort which was proving much more severe than he had expected, because he had not taken into account the slow cur-rent setting across the inundated marshes. If he yielded to that current it would bear him he knew not whither, and he battled against it desperately, spending his small strength. He gained, but very slowly, and he knew that his goal was still far away.

In his long life Lotor had encountered most of the

perils of the woods. The marshes were not strange to him, for he roamed over them often, generally by night, and hundreds of times he had swum the salt creeks which wound everywhere through the level plains of waving grass. But never before had he found himself in such surroundings as those which now encompassed him; never before had he struggled for his life in waters which seemed illimitable, waters which seemed to have covered all the world.

Lotor was afraid—afraid of the gurgling unending waters, of the current which clutched and pulled him, of the shadowy forms which swept over him now and then in the moonlight, of other vague sinister shapes which he could not see or hear but which he somehow knew to be near at hand. And suddenly the fear that gripped him flamed into mad terror.

Close beside him, so close that it seemed almost at his ear, sounded a loud, deep sigh, long-drawn and melancholy, yet sibilant and therefore menacing like the hiss of some huge snake. Startled half out of his wits, Lotor saw a great plated head thrust up out of the water—a hideous, yellow-brown head, many times larger than his own, naked, big-eyed and reptilelike, yet beaked like a bird of prey. Often Lotor, roaming the barrier beaches at night, had found the trails or crawls of sea turtles and occasionally he had unearthed their eggs buried deep

in the island sands. Once or twice he had come upon the ponderous sea creatures themselves, laboriously making their way across the beach in the darkness. But in his terror he did not recognize this monstrous head thrust up beside him as the head of a giant turtle which had come in through an inlet with the storm tide to explore the tidal channels winding through the flooded marsh plains.

The huge beaked head remained visible only for a moment, but the dread which it inspired did not so swiftly wear away. Lotor was still quivering from the shock of that apparition when, directly ahead of him and not more than fifty feet distant, the water boiled and swirled, writhed like a live thing, then burst into white seething foam.

A black bulk heaved upward from the depths and close beside it another and another—three great beasts of the waters, swimming side by side, rushing straight down upon the little coon.

Panic gave Lotor strength. He turned and swam for his life; yet even with the current under him, he moved at a snail's pace compared with the huge black water beasts racing onward at a speed which might rival that of a fleeing deer. Lotor heard the swish of spray close behind him, felt the water surge under him, gave himself up for lost.

Waves drenched his head and face, foam bubbled round him, his small body spun and bobbed in a

whirlpool which all but pulled him under. Then swiftly the water grew calm again so that once more it was placid as a lake, save for small ripples and swirls here and there; and presently Lotor saw, yards away and dimly visible in the pale moonlight, the tall fins and black rounded backs of the three big porpoises racing onward at top speed.

The strength of frenzy, of wild irresistible terror, which for a little while had spurred him to redoubled exertions, passed suddenly out of him. Great weariness came upon him; his limbs grew heavy, his body cold. No longer able to stem the current, he drifted with it, swimming feebly, barely keeping himself afloat. Suddenly, as though hope and strength had been mysteriously born again, he swung around in a half circle, and with some semblance of his former vigor resumed his battle with the current, swimming not directly against it, but diagonally across it. Far away to his left a low, black, irregular wall lay athwart the moonlit waste of waters. Lotor knew that what he saw was a line of trees.

For a few minutes he made good headway. There were wide stretches where the current moved very slowly; but wherever a creek channel wound through the submerged marshes the tide was swifter and stronger; and presently Lotor knew that fate was against him, that just ahead of him lay such a channel. He could see the faster flow of the tide, the

swirls and ripples at the surface; and no sooner had he passed from the comparatively shallow water over the marsh into the much deeper water of the creek bed than the current laid hold of him with a grip which he could not resist.

Slowly, ruthlessly, it swept him down. He saw the line of trees slipping past him like giants marching across a moonlit sea. Already he was opposite the last of them, and he knew that those pines lined a little peninsula projecting into the flooded marshes and that the tide was sweeping him past this peninsula's tip. Doggedly, despairingly, he struggled. For every inch that he gained the current carried him sideways a yard. But at last, when his strength was all but gone, he knew that he had won.

The tide had relaxed its grip. He floated now in water that was almost still, and not more than a hundred feet away loomed the black spires of the pines. One last rally of strength and of courage and he was safe. Wearily he struggled on, his limbs like lead—a small, forlorn, gallant figure, making its last brave, pitiful fight for life.

From the top of a tall pine at the end of the peninsula round yellow orbs scanned the still, shimmering waters. Suddenly, as though lit by some inner fire, they glowed like small twin suns. At last, after hours of fruitless hunting, Eyes o' Flame, the horned owl, saw that which he sought—a wet

furry thing moving across the water; judging from its size, the protruding head of a swimming marsh rabbit.

A shadowy form floated outward from the pine top, outward and downward in a half circle, noiseless as a ghost. Wide, silent wings darkened over Lotor the Lucky, long claws struck deep into his nape. For a space of moments those wings churned the air frantically; then the place where they had been was empty. Only a foaming and splashing of the water marked the spot where Lotor and Eyes o' Flame had met once more.

Mat Norman, wielding his paddle lazily, glanced at the moon and decided that it was time to go home. The storm tide had kept him up late. All afternoon and evening he had watched the waters rise higher and higher until the miles of green salt flats in front of his house were completely covered. Knowing that the tide would not reach its crest until near midnight, Norman realized that something unusual was taking place. The hurricane season had not yet passed altogether, but there were no signs of an approaching storm. Norman concluded that a hurricane was moving up the coast well out at sea, too far away to be dangerous, but near enough to cause an abnormally high tide.

The still waters glittering in the moonlight lured him to the landing where he kept his small bateau. For hours he paddled over salt flats which ordinarily stood several feet above high-water mark. He was a mile or more from home, paddling along the edge of a wooded tongue of land where tall pines ranged themselves in a long line, when drowsiness came upon him.

He swung the boat around and retraced his course along the pineland's edge. Just before rounding the point of the peninsula, he saw dimly in the moonlight a big bird perching on a high limb of a pine. From its shape and size he knew it to be a horned owl, probably the same owl which he had encountered a few nights earlier and to which, in accordance with a custom of his, he had given a fanciful name.

He stopped the boat and sat for a while watching. Old Eyes o' Flame, he judged, was on the lookout for marsh rabbits driven from their accustomed haunts by the rising tide.

Suddenly Norman saw the owl leave his perch, sweep outward in a descending half circle, swing noiselessly down to the water. The big bird did not rise again; from the spot where he had dipped to the surface came a sound of wildly beating wings. This soon ceased; but Norman saw a commotion in the water just at that spot, and instantly, with

strong thrusts of his paddle, he drove the boat forward.

He could hear the tops of the marsh blades brushing against the bateau's bottom. The water was not more than four feet deep; but not even the tip of an owl wing was visible when he reached the place—only a churning and swirling of the water as though a struggle were proceeding beneath the surface. Norman hesitated an instant. It might be a small shark that Eyes o' Flame had struck by mistake; it might be an otter or something else that could bite. He took a chance, thrusting in his arm as far as he could reach. Almost at once his fingers closed on both feathers and fur.

Norman had paddled halfway home when Eyes o' Flame, the great horned owl, took his leave. For a while he had lain, apparently more dead than alive, on the forward thwart where Norman had placed him, making queer gurgling noises in his throat, his round eyes dazed and glassy, his head wabbling weakly. Soon, however, he struggled to a sitting posture, the gurgling sounds ceased, his eyes became again alert and defiant.

Norman was wondering whether those wet wings would bear the owl aloft, when suddenly the wings opened, the big horned head was thrust forward menacingly, the strong curved bill snapped twice

with a sharp metallic sound. Next moment Eyes o' Flame was gone.

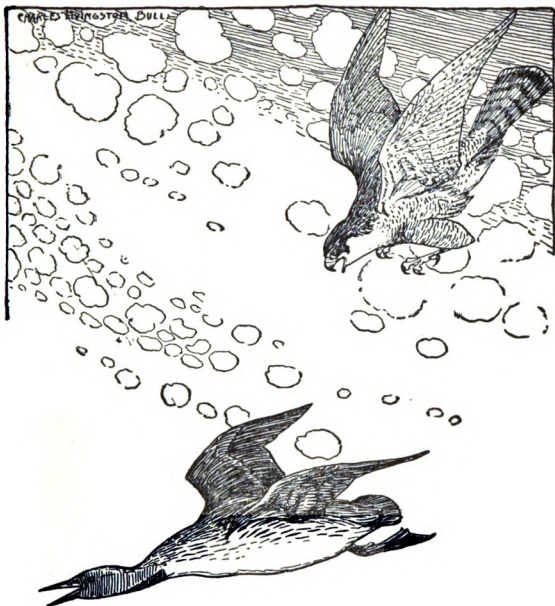
Norman watched him fade into the gloom, then glanced again at the little tailless coon, dragged and tousled, lying in the bottom of the boat, his wet fur flecked with blood where sharp claws had pierced his neck so deeply that Norman had not found it easy to withdraw them. Lotor the Lucky had not moved. He lay as limp and still as when he had first been lifted from the water. Though he still breathed, his eyes were closed. Norman shook his head.

He was sorry. For years he had known the old bobtailed raccoon, and often he had studied the record of Lotor's wanderings, recognizing his trail by the four missing toes and the crushed heel which caused the little coon to limp. Norman knew that he would not find that trail again in the wet paths through the rush-grown meadows or along the margins of the marsh plains. The luck of Lotor the Lucky—luck which was really the reward of wisdom—had failed at last.

At the landing, Norman laid down his paddle and, stepping forward past the coon, took a turn of the bowline around a post. The boat's momentum carried it forward a few feet so that it swung broadside against the bank where myrtle bushes formed thickets here and there and live-oak limbs overhung

the water. Norman jerked the rope twice to tighten it on the post, then turned.

He saw a small raccoon with only the stump of a tail climbing from the boat to the bank. The raccoon moved with considerable agility. Limping a little, Lotor the Lucky ambled briskly up the slope and vanished in the shadow of the myrtles.



The Bachelors of Devilhead

THE BACHELORS OF DEVILHEAD

FOR a week the daisy-starred upland meadows had danced and glittered in sunlight much to warm for June. Then, in the early afternoon of the seventh day, a great storm broke about the craggy summit of Devilhead and for three hours or more the cannon of the clouds rumbled and roared amid the peaks. Young Dan Alexander, watching the spectacle from the deep valley under Devilhead, talked to himself, as was his habit.

“Cloud King and Red Rogue,” he muttered, “you’re gettin’ some music now; an’ up where you are that thunder’s ten times as loud. I wonder how you like it.”

They liked it little, because all this tumult of the elements was a departure from the normal course of things and interfered seriously with the necessary business of life. Yet neither Cloud King, the peregrine falcon, nor Red Rogue, the fox, who had their homes on Devilhead within twenty yards of each other, was frightened by the storm. They knew what it was, having experienced many storms in their time, and they took it calmly enough.

Red Rogue dozed quietly on a dry bed of leaves at the inner end of the deep natural tunnel which was his favorite den. Here, in the heart of the huge rock mass forming Devilhead's summit, the old fox was snug and safe from wind and rain and lightning, while even the mightiest of the thunderclaps came to his ears so softened and subdued that the storm seemed miles away. Cloud King, the falcon, had no such remote retreat. The wind and the rain beat upon the portal of his castle; the glare of the lightning lit its inmost recesses; the crash of the thunder was like the crack of doom. But Cloud King, the peregrine, was a brother of the thunder, a son of the mountain storms. All his life he had dwelt with them and they struck no terror to his heart. While Red Rogue slept peacefully in his rock-ribbed fortress, the big gray duck hawk stood alert and wakeful in his aerie, a small cave in the face of the cliff fifty feet above the entrance of Red Rogue's den, and watched with sullen, undismayed eyes the prodigious drama of the storm.

Dan Alexander, gazing up at the peak from the porch of his father's cabin under Devilhead, guessed that this would be the way of it. A rare man was Dan. He had had some schooling and even a year at college in a city of the lowlands; but his mountains had called to him and presently he had returned to share with his father the little cabin under

Devilhead, to farm a little after the fashion of the mountaineers and to indulge to the utmost his passion for hunting. He knew the beasts and the birds of the upland woods as few mountain woodsmen have known them; and somewhere in him there was a romantic, imaginative strain, strengthened and developed by his schooling and by the books he had read, which caused him to give names to certain ones among the wild creatures which, for one reason or another, strongly stirred his interest.

Chief among these were the two dwellers on Devilhead peak. Many times Dan's path had crossed that of Red Rogue, the old dog fox. Day after day he had watched Cloud King, the peregrine falcon, patrolling the air roads of his wide kingdom. Again and again he had seen the bloody handiwork of these two wild hunters who inhabited the inaccessible cliff at the summit of the mountain; and long ago he had declared war against them, matching his skill and woodcraft against their wiliness and swiftness, finding all the more pleasure in the contest when he learned, as he very soon did, that the two buccaneers of Devilhead were well able to take care of themselves.

For weeks he had hunted them persistently, neglecting all other game, often lying in ambush on the mountain's summit above the precipice where they had their homes, even risking his life in an

effort to traverse the face of the cliff itself. Once he had clipped a feather from Cloud King's wing; once and once only he had looked at Red Rogue along the barrel of a rifle. It was a long shot and the bullet had gone an inch too high. Angry and piqued because his woodcraft had been set at naught, Dan nevertheless realized that he was wasting his time and abandoned his intensive campaign. But he did not acknowledge himself beaten. On the contrary, he was constantly on the alert for the opportunity which he was satisfied would come. Always, when he roamed the mountain slopes and valleys in search of grouse or turkeys or squirrels, he kept Red Rogue and Cloud King in mind; and always, when he looked up at the huge mountain towering above his cabin, his eyes sought the lofty cliff where the two wild hunters had their homes.

For many minutes he gazed at that cliff on the June afternoon when, after a week of heat and drought, the first summer storm of the season broke about Devilhead's summit. The rain, which was fast hiding the mountain, was drenching the valley also. Already the first big drops were pattering on the roof of Dan's cabin. There were chores to be attended to, but for the present he must wait under shelter until the worst of the storm had passed. So, with feet cocked up on the railing of the porch, he sat and puffed at his old black pipe, watching the

onward sweep of a great leaden cloud which barely topped the peak a thousand feet above him across the narrow valley, marveling a little at the play of the lightning and the crash of the thunder, idly wondering how the two dwellers on Devilhead were faring in the storm.

Presently Dan's gray eyes narrowed and brightened. He took the pipe from his mouth and pursed his lips, frowning thoughtfully and drumming on his knee with long bony fingers.

"It'll rain all afternoon an' pretty much all night," he muttered. "They'll not be able to hunt an' they'll be hungry in the mornin'. Lord knows where Cloud King'll go; but I'll bet a hat Red Rogue'll go straight to Rocky Meadow as soon as the grass is dry an' pick up some mice to take the sting out of his appetite."

Dan knocked out his pipe, yawned and stretched his long arms, bare to the elbow.

"Got a good notion to meet him there 'bout an hour after sunup," he said to himself.

At first dawn Red Rogue awoke. He had slept blissfully throughout the night, seeming somehow aware, even in the retirement of his rocky retreat, that outside the rain was still falling. Red Rogue did not like rain. He hated to get his fur or even

his feet wet; and though he was hungry, he was loath to leave the shelter of his dry bed until the sun had shone for at least a little while on the drenched grasses and weeds of the high upland meadows. So, although the rain had ceased a little before dawn, the old fox, after considering the situation for a moment without moving, went to sleep again and dozed until after sunrise. Then he rose, stretched his long, lithe, rusty-red body lazily, scratched a black-tipped ear with a black hind foot, and trotted briskly toward the exit of his rock-walled tunnel.

On the narrow shelf outside he halted, testing the wind with quivering nostrils while his gaze roved over the vast panorama spread before him. The storm had washed the air clean and crystal clear; the heat which had lain so heavy on the land for seven days had broken; there was a sharp nip in the gentle breeze, which drove the last vestige of drowsiness from Red Rogue's brain.

That cold, crisp air was like wine. Red Rogue was old—so old that for two springs he had not mated, though he was still strong of wind and limb; but, old though he was, he was sensible of the magic of the morning and felt new energy and vigor in every fibre of his body.

His eyes shining, his slim ears cocked, his long, beautiful, white-tipped tail held high behind him, he drank the faint fragrance of a million daisies and

looked out over his blue-and-purple kingdom of mountain and valley. Once, for a moment, his gaze rested on Dan Alexander's cabin nestling in the oak and chestnut woods clothing the gorgelike valley far below. As though the sight of that cabin were a challenge, he barked three times, each bark a clear thin note, less querulous than usual, with something of joy and something of confident defiance in the ring of it. Then jauntily, with mincing steps and elevated brush, he trotted along the shelf and, lightly leaping a gap in the narrow way, passed around a jutting shoulder of the cliff with never a glance at the abysmal chasm yawning under him.

Indifferently, with no change of expression in his grim dark eyes, Cloud King, the peregrine falcon, watched him go. The big duck hawk took little interest in the old red fox who shared with him the craggy summit of Devilhead; but because it was his business to watch every moving thing within range of his vision, his eyes followed Red Rogue as he picked his sure-footed way around the precipitous face of the cliff, until he vanished in a dense kalmia thicket fringing the rocky forehead of the mountain. Yet, except that the nature of wild things forbade it, there might have existed a certain fellow feeling between these two dwellers on Devilhead's loftiest peak.

Not only were they near neighbors, sharing the

security of a precipice virtually inaccessible to man. They shared, too, the distinction of bachelorhood—a real distinction in their case, because it indicated that they had been victors in the stern battle for life, and, eluding death in many forms, had won through to old age, when love and mating no longer interested them.

Even as Red Rogue was mateless, so, too, was Cloud King. If a mate had come to him he might have taken her. But the peregrine, boldest and most destructive of the falcons, had been the hated enemy of mankind for generations and its numbers had been thinned. Never abundant in the high inland region around Devilhead, where there were no large rivers or extensive lakes to attract ducks, the peregrine's favorite prey, this swiftest and handsomest of all the hawk kind had all but vanished from the mountain country.

For this Cloud King cared nothing. He was as contented in his loneliness as was Red Rogue, the fox; and the absence of other buccaneers of his race meant simply a larger food supply for himself. Only occasionally did the golden eagles, which nested farther to the westward, invade his hunting ground. In general he enjoyed a virtual monopoly—so far as other preying birds were concerned—of the ruffed grouse, the choicest game which the mountain country afforded, while quail and doves

were abundant enough to supply his own needs as well as those of the lesser hawks which also hunted them. Except when the imperial eagles came, Cloud King was lord of all the airy spaces above the peaks and valleys, a monarch as valiant as he was ruthless, swift as the wind, thewed and muscled more powerfully in proportion to his size than any other bird of prey—a perfect specimen of the “Noble Peregrine” which the knights of ancient time, who delighted in falconry, considered the premier bird of the chase.

From his aerie fifty feet above the entrance of Red Rogue’s den, Cloud King saw the old fox pass around the shoulder of the cliff and vanish amid the kalmias. Then, as though the sight of his neighbor going forth to the hunt had whetted his own appetite, he spread his dark barred wings, much longer than those of most other hawks, and swept out from the face of the precipice. After a few strong wing thrusts, he closed his pinions and dropped for perhaps thirty feet. Spreading his wings again, he planed down a long incline, gaining speed every second, rushing down toward the billowy tops of the tall chestnuts at the bottom of the deep valley. When it seemed that in another instant he must crash into the uppermost branches of the trees, he checked his descent by an almost imperceptible movement of his wings and sped onward past the

tree tops and across a little wheat field a hundred yards behind Dan Alexander's cabin.

A score of startled eyes saw him as he cleared the chestnut tops. Almost in the center of the wheat field stood a small wild cherry tree loaded with shining crimson fruit—crowded, too, with birds from the surrounding woods and thickets. Brown thrashers, catbirds, wood thrushes, towhees and one brilliant black-winged scarlet tanager were feasting in the cherry tree when the feathered cannon ball shot into view from behind the chestnut grove; and, of them all, the tanager, partial as always to the higher branches, was the most exposed, seeking his breakfast amid the topmost twigs. With a frightened cry the blood-red bird darted from his perch; but Cloud King, his eye caught instantly by that vivid spot of color, gripped him with long black talons before he had flown five feet.

When he had plucked and eaten his prey in a tall white oak which was one of his favorite feeding stations, the big duck hawk set about the real business of the day. The tanager was merely an appetizer. Often in cherry time Cloud King began his morning with a raid on the small birds which breakfasted at the small but prolific tree in the wheat field a thousand feet below his aerie; but he was never content with such trivial game, and these morning raids were little more than diversions.

Leaving the white oak, he spiraled upward, mounting higher and higher above the deep narrow valley, until he looked down upon the peak of Devil-head itself. Still higher he rose, so high that the flutelike tones of wood thrushes singing on the wooded mountain slopes no longer came to him; so high that he could view from end to end the whole summit of the long irregular ridge of which Devil-head peak was the loftiest eminence. Here and there, on saddles of this high ridge, the hardwood forest which clothed the slopes and most of the summit fell away, giving place to small natural meadows embosomed like lakes of vivid green in the darker green of the surrounding woods. Suddenly a small dark object in one of these meadows almost directly beneath him arrested Cloud King's attention.

A man looking down from that vast height would have distinguished nothing worthy of special note. The tiny object upon which the hawk's eyes were fixed would have appeared no different from a hundred other dark spots on the green grass carpet—spots which were merely rocks and boulders, from the abundance of which Rocky Meadow got its name. Nor would a human eye have perceived that this particular dark spot was moving—moving gradually and intermittently, inch by inch and foot by foot, out toward the center of the grassy space.

Yet to the marvelous eyes of Cloud King not only was the slow movement of this dark object perceptible but so also was almost every detail of the object itself.

To the eyes of the circling peregrine this dark spot among many other dark spots was a man—a man crawling on hands and knees and carrying a rifle in his right hand. More than that, Cloud King's eyes disclosed to him exactly what man this was; for they could distinguish the brown canvas cap and the gray woolen shirt which belonged to the tall young woodsman who lived in the valley under Cloud King's aerie on Devilhead. So much the peregrine's wonderful vision told him. Had his brain been as perfectly developed as his eyes, he might presently have seen more than this; for he would then have deduced a purpose in the slow, sinister advance of the hunter across the rock-strewn meadow, and he would have scanned the ground to discover what game it was that the hunter was stalking so cautiously.

But Cloud King's powers of reasoning did not extend so far. He saw the man and watched him curiously; but nothing told him that this man was engaged upon a very definite quest now nearing a climax. His attention centered upon the hunter, the falcon saw the smaller dark spot which was Red Rogue, the fox, without distinguishing its nature.

Had this smaller spot moved while Cloud King was circling above the meadow, his eyes would have focused upon it instantly and he would have recognized his neighbor of Devilhead peak. But Red Rogue, after catching a mouse or two, had discovered a cottontail feeding on certain juicy stems which grew along the tiny stream meandering across the meadow, and he had now completed his preparations for a cottontail breakfast. Making a wide detour, he had posted himself behind a rock toward which the rabbit was moving slowly, following the course of the brook. Close to this rock the old fox sat on his haunches as motionless as a stump, unaware of the hunter, down the wind from him and at his back, crawling nearer and nearer and skillfully utilizing the scattered rocks and boulders of the meadow to screen his approach.

For perhaps five minutes the peregrine swung in wide circles high above Rocky Meadow, watching the hunter idly yet intently, never suspecting that in the green amphitheatre far beneath him the stage was being set for a tragedy. Then, the edge of his curiosity dulled, he resumed his spiral ascent. Up and up he climbed, passing through and above a thin mistlike layer of cloud which, for all its gauzy tenuousness, presently shut the earth from his view. Two hundred feet above this cloud blanket the big hawk careened suddenly in the air, like a schooner

struck by a sudden squall. Righting himself with a few swift thrusts of his pinions, he turned his head eastward and, with wings widely extended, shot at terrific speed in that direction, his long barred tail twisting spasmodically to right and left.

Unknowingly and without warning the falcon had climbed up into a current of warm air rushing through space like a vast invisible river to fill some hole or hollow in the upper atmosphere produced by the storm of the previous night. Cloud King disliked being jostled and hustled in this fashion; but the aërial river was bearing him in the direction which he had intended to follow as soon as he had gained the desired altitude. Hence, for a while, he was content to ride on the wings of this ghostly soundless gale racing on its mysterious way above the clouds which hid the world.

Mile after mile the peregrine rode the wind, balancing himself with slight movements of his wings and tail, borne eastward at a rate which nearly equaled the swiftest pace at which his own pinions could have driven him. Then, apprised by some faculty beyond human ken that he was approaching the high ridge where he intended to hunt ruffed grouse, he adjusted the rudder of his tail in such a way as to guide him downward in a gradual slant toward the white cloud blanket far beneath him. As suddenly as he had entered it, he passed out

of the rushing river of wind into air which was practically still; and a few minutes later, spiraling downward, he plunged into the stratum of cloud. Through this shallow sea of vapor he dropped swiftly with half-closed wings and presently saw the familiar panorama of forested mountain and valley spread beneath him.

Something else also he saw—something which immediately riveted his attention. Far away to the westward, just under the white cloud blanket, a black speck moved across the sky—a speck which resolved itself at once to Cloud King's farsighted eyes as a large, long-necked, short-tailed bird flying at high speed with rapid, powerful wing beats. Instantly the peregrine forgot the ruffed grouse which frequented the wooded slope beneath him and in quest of which he had traveled many miles from the aerie on Devilhead. Here was game even choicer and far rarer than the drumming cocks of the upland woods—game not often to be had among the mountains and not to be neglected when some fortunate chance brought it into the mountain country.

Cloud King had no doubt that the big long-bodied bird, speeding westward on whirring wings five hundred feet above the long valley of the Chinquapin, was a duck. Even at that great distance he could see its contour plainly. Its shape was that of a duck

and it flew as a duck flies. Yet it seemed too large to be either a wood duck or a hooded merganser, the only species of the duck tribe at all likely to be seen in the high uplands in early summer. But the question of its precise identity was of little concern to the peregrine. It mattered little what kind of duck this was. All the ducks were royal provender; and the moment called for action, not speculation.

An instant Cloud King hung almost motionless in the air, like a runner who nerves himself for the start of a hard race. Then his long pointed wings began to move with regular measured strokes—strokes which seemed deliberate and unhurried, yet somehow gave an impression of great power. Faster and faster those calm, monotonously even wing beats drove his hard, muscular body forward; and gradually, imperceptibly, as the speed of his flight increased, the movement of his long pinions became more rapid. But never at this stage of the chase was there any appearance of undue exertion. The big hawk was driving through the air at a rate far exceeding that of the fastest locomotive; yet he seemed not to hurry at all, but sped on his way as easily and lightly as a migrating swallow.

It may be that a definite purpose, to which he reacted instinctively rather than through exercise of any reasoning faculty, governed the falcon's tactics. It was often his custom to carry choice bits

of game to his aerie on the cliff; and if in this instance he postponed the fatal blow for a while, he would not have to transport the carcass so far, for his quarry was heading straight up the valley toward the blue peak of Devilhead, dimly visible in the distance. Possibly, on the other hand, the seeming deliberateness of his flight was simply an instinctive recognition of the fact that this was likely to be a hard chase, in which he must not wear himself out at the beginning. His quarry had a long start; the test was one of endurance as well as speed. With all his superb muscular development, the falcon might not win this race if at the outset he expended his strength too lavishly.

So, for a space of minutes, Cloud King's long dark pinions fanned the air with a motion scarcely more rapid than that which he habitually employed when journeying to some outlying corner of his widespread kingdom. Nevertheless, the keen, fierce eyes, fixed immovably upon that flying form far ahead, told him that he was gaining. As a matter of fact, the peregrine, though he had not yet called all his powers into play, was flying nearly twice as fast as his prospective victim.

The latter—a long-bodied, torpedo-shaped, gray-and-white bird, considerably larger than a mallard, and marked with a chestnut patch on his throat—was evidently unaware of his peril. His rather

short wings, smiting the air rapidly, drove his heavy projectilelike body forward at high speed. But that speed had not been increased in the few minutes which had elapsed since the beginning of the chase; those wing beats had grown no more rapid. The big bird, unconscious of the stern, masterful pursuer racing after him and still far in his rear, was flying at the rate characteristic of the red-throated loon when migrating or when journeying overland from one feeding ground to another.

It was a journey of the latter sort that the loon was now undertaking. Having depleted the fish resources of one small mountain lake, he was in search of another; and since the mountain region was strange to him and lakes were very few and small, he was eagerly scanning the country over which he passed. He was in that country as the result of accident. A bird of the seacoast, whose summer home was the upper North, he had started on his return to Labrador, when a spring gale of unusual violence blew him far inland. Winging his way over forested ridges and valleys, he saw beneath him a small lake not unlike those of his Canadian home. Here he had alighted, and, finding the lake well stocked with fish, here he had been content to linger.

Spring came later to the mountains than to the coast, and when, as the days grew warmer, the migratory urge took hold of him again, the normal

time of his mating was far past. Perhaps for that reason the instinct which should have sent him on toward the Arctic was dulled and crippled. Vaguely discontented and somewhat lonely, twice he rose into the air to fly to the far-off boreal land where his fellows were nesting; and twice instinct failed him and he returned.

Thus he had stayed on, an accidental exile in a region where his kind were almost unknown; and as spring merged into summer his restlessness gradually passed, and, despite the unaccustomed warmth, he grew more and more contented with his placid little lake, ringed round with alders and shaded by tall hemlocks and gigantic tulip trees. He might have remained there months longer but for the fact that after a while the fish upon which he fed became inconveniently scarce. It was this exigency, the failure of his food supply, which finally compelled him to seek a new fishing ground; and it was grim chance which directed his flight southward across a high balsam-covered range, then westward up the long valley of the Chinquapin, toward Devilhead peak, where Cloud King, the peregrine, had his home.

A third of the distance to Devilhead had been covered when at last the red-throated loon became aware of his pursuer. By that time—and scarcely more than five minutes had elapsed since the begin-

ning of the chase, so swiftly were the two birds moving—the hawk had cut down the distance between himself and his quarry by more than half. Cloud King now knew that the big bird ahead of him and perhaps a hundred feet below him was not a duck of any of the species known to him; but he judged it to be of the duck kind, and although it was larger than the birds upon which he was accustomed to prey, he was more determined than ever to attack and kill it. He could not grapple so large a bird in the air. Instead, he planned to fall upon it from above and hurl it to the ground. The chase had fanned into fierce flame the fury which possessed him in moments of violent action, and his bold spirit counted no odds of size or weight.

The peregrine was instantly aware that his approach had been discovered. The loon's pinions whirred twice as rapidly as before; his long body leaped forward and shot onward at a speed which was a startling revelation of his powers. Cloud King's fierce eyes glowed with a sterner light; his great yellow feet, armed with long, black, needle-pointed talons, opened and closed convulsively. Suddenly he screamed—a wild, shrill cry which the fugitive might have interpreted as a cry of disappointment and baffled rage.

Yet, though he no longer gained, and perhaps even dropped a little behind, the falcon apparently

made no effort to increase the velocity of his flight. His long wings still smote the air with that deliberateness and evenness of stroke which gave a sinister impression of confident mastery of the situation and seemed somehow to hint of hidden powers still held in reserve.

The red-throated loon was fleeing for his life. Terror gripped him, and in the clutch of that terror he was exerting every atom of his strength. But Cloud King, the peregrine, even in the wild fury of the chase, was cool, skillful, clear-headed, a master craftsman; and the craft, the business of the peregrine, is the pursuit of swift, strong-winged birds, some of them—like the teal, for instance—among the swiftest of all the birds that fly. Instinctively Cloud King knew the strategy of the problem before him, the age-old problem of his kind. He made no mistake, was betrayed into no false step. The sudden burst of speed which seemed to forecast the fugitive's escape was no surprise to the pursuer. On the contrary, the latter expected it; for always at the moment of discovery, this spurt came.

The question—the only important question—was, how long would the spurt last? And until he had some indication of the answer Cloud King was far too expert at this game of life and death—a game which his forbears had played for countless

centuries—to call upon that reserve of strength which might be needed before the end.

Quickly he had his answer. After a minute or two he saw that the rapidity of the fugitive's wing strokes was slackening; and presently the hawk's intent, unwinking eyes, marvelously accurate measurers of distance, told him that the space between pursuer and pursued was beginning to diminish again.

In that moment Cloud King knew that the victory was his whenever he chose to grasp it; and he knew also that the moment was near at hand. The tall peak of Devilhead, which at the beginning of the chase had stood pale and dim on the blue horizon, now reared its dark forested bulk scarcely more than three miles away. In another minute or so the loon would be directly over the long irregular ridge of which Devilhead crag, at the ridge's southern end, was the apex.

Suddenly—so suddenly that the effect was mysterious and startling, as though some unseen outside force had hurled the hawk forward—Cloud King doubled his speed. Gone now was that appearance of grim, calm, masterful deliberateness. The long pointed wings were driving now as hard and as fast as muscle and sinew could drive them; and the peregrine, still a hundred feet higher than

his quarry, was overhauling the fugitive almost as though the latter were standing still.

A half minute more and Cloud King's head reached downward, his fierce eyes measuring the distance. Again he screamed and again the great yellow feet with their armament of trenchant claws opened and shut beneath him. Then, his wings half closed, his talons spread, his barred tail open like a fan, he shot down upon his victim.

Dan Alexander, flat on his stomach behind a low mossy boulder near the center of Rocky Meadow, heard that scream faintly, but was too busy to glance upward. He had completed his long stalk at last; and now, for the second time in his life, he was looking at Red Rogue, the fox, along the barrel of a rifle. Dan was supremely content. He had given much time and labor to this bit of still-hunting and had crawled painfully across half the width of Rocky Meadow. But he had not taken all this trouble in vain. Red Rogue, still sitting on his haunches beside the big boulder near the brook, was an easy target. Dan, squinting along his rifle barrel, was debating whether to aim for the middle of that rusty-red back—in which case he could not miss—or risk a fancy shot at the fox's head.

Red Rogue also heard the peregrine's scream; and

he also was too busy at that moment to concern himself with the business of his neighbor of Devilhead peak. The cottontail, nibbling her way along the brook margin, had nibbled in leisurely fashion and had kept the old fox waiting a long while for his breakfast. Now, however, the rabbit had approached within a few yards of the boulder. In another minute or two Red Rogue's chance would come.

Of the three who were playing the grim game of hunter and hunted in Rocky Meadow, only the cottontail had even a moment's warning of the strange thing that occurred. At the falcon's scream she crouched low in the weeds beside the brook, her frightened eyes searching the sky. She saw a dark body hurtling downward and she crouched still lower, expecting each moment to feel the hawk's talons in her flank. But neither Red Rogue nor Dan Alexander saw that falling body. Neither of these two knew that it was falling until it struck the ground between the hunter and the fox, not more than ten feet behind the fox's back.

Red Rogue never knew what it was that fell from the sky. He did not stop to investigate its nature. Startled half out of his wits by a swish of wind and a sudden heavy thud directly behind him and close by, he leaped over the boulder in front and raced twenty yards at top speed before he looked back.

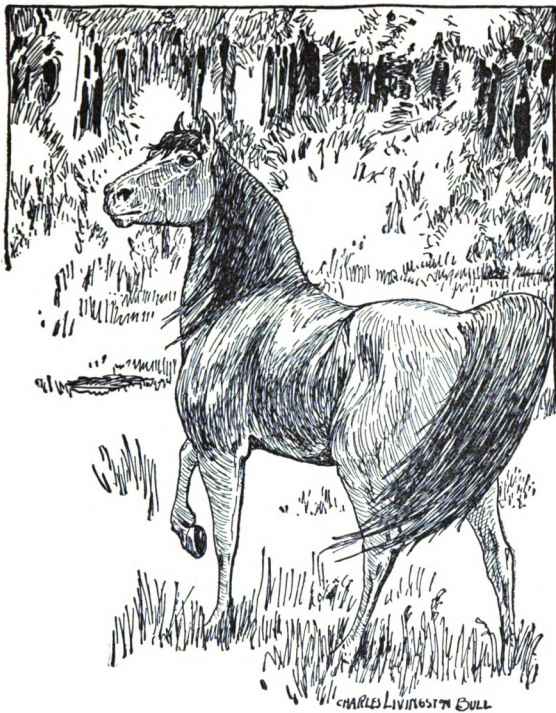
He saw the tall young woodsman who lived in the cabin under Devilhead running forward, rifle in hand; and, changing his direction slightly, the old fox continued on his way.

As for Dan, he quickly unraveled one mystery. But another and deeper one remained. When he had examined the big bird which had fallen out of the clouds—a queer bird of a kind that he had never before seen in the mountains—and discovered that its back was ripped and torn from neck to tail as though sharp claws had raked it, he remembered that faintly heard scream, and, looking up, he saw Cloud King, the peregrine, circling high in the air. He knew then why the unknown bird had fallen.

Yet he was puzzled and a little troubled. The superstition of the mountain folk, inherited from generations of ancestors, was strong in him. This thing which had happened before his eyes was strange beyond all imagining, a marvel for which there was no precedent in all his experience of the woods. Another moment and he would have sent a bullet crashing into Red Rogue's back or brain; but in that moment Cloud King, the falcon, appearing suddenly in the sky, had saved the life of the neighbor with whom he shared the solitude of Devilhead crag.

In spite of himself, Dan wondered whether the strange thing which he had witnessed was not a sign,

an omen—perhaps a grim, uncanny warning like those of which old women in the mountain cabins sometimes told. Even while he mocked his own thoughts, Dan knew that, for a while at any rate, he would hunt the bachelors of Devilhead no more.



Northwind

NORTHWIND

IT was in the days when Moytoy of Tel-lequo was High Chief of the Cherokee nation that the wild chestnut stallion known afterwards as Northwind left the savannahs of the Choctaw country and traveled to the Overhills of the Cherokees. He made this long journey because the Choctaw horse-hunters had been pressing him hard. A rumor had run through the tribe, started perhaps by some learned conjurer or medicine man, that the tall, long-maned chestnut stallion who was king of the wild horse herds was descended from the famous steed which the Prince Soto rode when, many years before, he led his Spaniards through the Choctaw lands far into the Mississippi wilderness and perished there.

This rumor sharpened the eagerness of the younger braves, for it was well known that Soto's horse had magic in him. That spring they hunted the wild stallion more persistently than ever; and at last, taking two sorrel mares with him, he struck northeastward, seeking safer pastures.

He did not find them in the Overhills, as the

Cherokees called the high Smokies and the Blue Ridge where they lived and hunted. At dawn one May morning, as he lay on a bed of fresh sweet-scented grass near the middle of a natural pasture known as Long Meadow, a warning came to him. He raised his head high and sniffed the air, then jumped nimbly to his feet. For a half-minute, however, he did not rouse the two mares lying on either side of him: and they, if they were aware of his movement, were content to await his signal.

He gave the signal presently, and the mares rose, their ears pricked, their nostrils quivering. A light breeze blew across the meadow from the north. The stallion faced south, for his sensitive nose told him that no foeman was approaching from the opposite direction. He knew that his ears had not deceived him and that the sound which he had heard was near at hand. But he did not know the exact quarter from which the sound had come; and though his large eyes were well adapted to the dim light, nowhere could he discern that sinister weaving movement of the tall, close-growing grass which would reveal the stealthy approach of bear or puma. So, for some minutes, he waited motionless, his head held high, every faculty keyed to the utmost.

Twenty yards away down the wind Corane the Raven, young warrior of the Cherokees, crouching

low in the grass, watched the wild stallion eagerly. Himself invisible, he could see his quarry more and more plainly as the light grew stronger; and he knew already that the wits of this slim, long-maned chestnut horse, which had come over the mountains from the west, were worthy of his beauty and strength. With all his art—and the Raven prided himself on his skill as a still-hunter—and with all the conditions in his favor, he had been baffled. Having located the beds of the wild horses, he had left his own horse, Manito-Kinibic, at the edge of the woods and had crept through the grass as furtively as a lynx. But his approach had been detected when he was yet five lance-lengths distant, and since then the stallion had made no false move, had committed no error of judgment.

Corane the Raven knew the wild horses well. Most of them were small and wiry, already approaching the mustang type of later years; but in those early days, before inbreeding had proceeded very far, an occasional stallion still revealed unmistakably the fine qualities of blooded forbears. From his hiding place in the grass the young warrior, naked except for a light loincloth of deer-hide, studied the great chestnut carefully, thoughtfully, marveling at the lithe symmetry of his powerful but beautifully moulded form, admiring his coolness and steadiness in the face of danger. The stallion

showed no sign of fear. He did not fidget or caper nervously. Only his head moved slowly back and forth, while with all his powers of sight, scent and hearing he strove to locate the precise spot where his enemy was lurking.

The Raven smiled in approval; and presently he applied a test of another kind.

With his long spear he pushed the grass stems in front of him, causing the tops of the tall blades to quiver and wave. The movement was slight; yet even in the pale morning light the wild horse saw it. He watched the spot intently for some moments. Then he moved slowly and cautiously forward, the mares following in his tracks. He moved neither towards the danger nor away from it. Instead, he circled it, and the Raven realized at once what the stallion's purpose was. He intended to get down wind from the suspected spot, so that his nose could tell him whether an enemy hid there, and, if so, what kind of enemy it was.

The young warrior waited, curious to see the outcome. Suddenly the stallion's head jerked upward. He was well down the wind now and a puff of air had filled his nostrils with the man-scent. A moment he stood at gaze; and in that moment one of the mares caught the tell-tale scent, snorted with terror and bolted at full speed. Close behind her raced the other mare; while the stallion, wheeling

gracefully, followed at a slower pace, his eyes searching the grassy plain ahead.

The Raven had risen to his feet and stood in plain view, but the chestnut stallion scarcely glanced at him again. He was no longer a menace. Of greater importance now were other dangers unknown, invisible, yet possibly imminent.

The natural meadows of lush grass and maiden cane were perilous places for the unwary. In them the puma set his ambush; there the black bear often lurked; hidden in that dense cover, the Indian horse-hunters sometimes waited with their snares. The mares, in a frenzy of panic, were beyond their protector's control. Their nostrils full of the man-smell, they had forgotten all other perils. But the stallion had not forgotten. Before the mares had run fifty yards the thing that he feared happened.

Out of the grass a black bulk heaved upward, reared high with huge hairy arms outspread, fell forward with a deep grunting roar on the haunch of the foremost mare. Screaming like a mad thing, the mare reeled, staggered and went down. In a fraction of a second she was on her feet again, but the big mountain black bear, hurling himself on her hindquarters, crushed them to the ground.

Corane the Raven, racing forward at the sound of the mare's frenzied scream, was near enough to see part of what happened. He saw the wild stal-

lion rear to his utmost height and come down with battering forefeet on the bear's back. He heard the stallion's loud squeal of fury, the bear's hoarse grunt of rage and pain. Next moment the mare was up again and running for her life, the stallion cantering easily behind her.

When the Raven reached the spot the bear had vanished; and the young Indian, marveling at what he had seen, ran towards the woods-edge where his swift roan, Manito-Kinibic, awaited him.

In this way began the chase of the chestnut stallion—Northwind, as he was afterwards known—that long hunt which Corane the Raven made long ago, even before the time of Atta-Kulla-Kulla the Wise. It was Dunmore the trader who first brought down from the Overhills the story of that hunt and told it one night in Nick Rounder's tavern in Charles Town. Dunmore had it from the Raven himself; and the Raven was known among the white traders and hunters as a truthful man. But he was known also as a man of few words, while Dunmore, great hunter and famous Indian fighter though he was, had a tongue more fluent than a play-actor's.

So it was probably Dunmore who put color into the story, and undoubtedly his quick brain, well warmed with rum that night in the tavern, filled in

many details. The tale appealed to him, for he was a lover of horses; and this story of the feud between Northwind, the wild stallion, and Manito-Kinibic, the Raven's roan, concerned two horses which were paladins of their kind.

For the hunt which began that morning in Long Meadow became in large measure a contest between these two. It happened that the Raven had returned not long before from a peace mission to the Choctaws, and while in their country he had heard of the wonderful wild horse which was said to have in him the blood of the Prince Soto's steed and which had vanished from the savannahs after defying all attempts to capture him. In the Overhills wild horses were rare. When the Raven found the tracks of three of them near Long Meadow about sunset one May day, he thought it worth while to sleep that night near the meadow's edge and have a look at the horses in the morning.

So at dawn he had tried to stalk them in their beds; and the moment he saw the wild stallion rise from his sleeping place in the grass he knew that the great chestnut horse of which the Choctaws had spoken stood before him. That morning in Long Meadow he knew also that he could not rest until he had taken this matchless wild horse for his own.

It would be a long hunt, for the stallion would not linger in the Overhills. Small bands of wild

horses occasionally crossed the mountains from the west, and always these migrating bands traveled fast, pausing only to feed. Yet, though the hunt might carry him far, Corane the Raven, as he ran swiftly across Long Meadow towards the woods-edge where he had left Manito-Kinibic, had little doubt as to its issue. This wild stallion was a great horse, beautiful, swift and strong—by far the finest wild horse that the Raven had ever seen. But there was one other that was his equal in all things except beauty; and that other was Manito-Kinibic, the Raven's roan.

There was no chief of the Cherokees, the Creeks or the Choctaws who had a horse that could match Manito-Kinibic. His like had never been known in the Overhills. Dunmore the trader had seen him and had wondered whence he came; for though the Raven had taken him from the Chickasaws, whose country lay west of the mountains, it was plain that this big-boned burly roan was not of the western or southern wild breed, while his name, which in the white man's tongue meant Rattlesnake, had to Dunmore's ear a northern sound.

Thick-bodied, wide-headed, short-maned, heavy-eared, Manito-Kinibic was almost grotesquely ugly; yet in his very ugliness there was a sinister, almost reptilian fascination, heightened by the metallic sheen of his red-speckled coat, the odd flatness of

his head and the fixed stony glare of his small, deep-set eyes. No warrior of the Cherokees except the Raven could ride him. Few could even approach him, for his temper was as arrogant as that of the royal serpent for which he was named.

There lurked in him, too, a craftiness recalling the subtle cunning which the red men attributed to the rattlesnake and because of which they venerated the king of serpents almost as a god; and with this craftiness he harbored a savage hatred of the wild creatures which the Indians hunted, so that on the hunt he was even more eager, even more relentless than his rider. It was the Raven's boast that Manito-Kinibic could follow a trail which would baffle many a red hunter; that he could scent game at a greater distance than the wolf; that his ears were as keen as those of the deer; that he was as crafty as the fox and as ruthless as the weasel; and that he feared no wild beast of the forest, not even the puma himself.

Such was the horse that Corane the Raven rode on his long hunt. From the beginning of that hunt until its end Manito-Kinibic seemed to live for one thing only—the capture of the wild stallion whose scent he snuffed for the first time that morning in Long Meadow after the wild horse's encounter with the bear.

A few minutes after that encounter, the Raven

had reached the woods-edge where he had left the big roan, had vaulted upon his back and, riding as swiftly as was prudent through the tall grass and beds of maiden cane, had struck the trail of the three wild horses near the spot where they had passed from the meadow at its lower end into the woods.

The trail was plain to the eye. The scent was strong where the wild horses had brushed through the rank grass. From that moment Manito-Kinibic knew what game it was that his rider hunted; and in that moment all the strange smouldering hatred of his nature was focused upon the wild stallion which, as his nose told him, had passed that way with one or two mares.

Manito-Kinibic leaped forward with long bounds, his nostrils dilated, his ears flattened against his head. Corane the Raven, smiling grimly, let him go. It might be true, as the Choc-taws believed, that the wild stallion was sprung from the mighty horse of the Prince Soto himself. But surely this huge implacable horse that now followed on the wild one's trail must have in his veins the blood of the great black steed which the Evil Spirit bestrode when he stood, wrapped in cloud, on the bare summit of Younaguska peak and hurled those awful arrows of his that flashed like lightning.

Northwind, the chestnut stallion, had passed within sight of Younaguska, highest of the Balsams, which men in these days call Caney Fork Bald; but that sombre mountain lay far behind him now, for he had crossed both the main ranges of the mountain bulwark and had begun to descend the eastern slope of the second and lesser range. From Long Meadow he led his mares southeastward at a steady gait, following in general the trend of the valleys and the downward-sloping ridges. The injured mare, though her haunch was raw and bloody where the bear's claws had raked it, kept pace with her companions; and the three traveled fast, pausing only once or twice to drink at some cold, clear, hemlock-shaded stream.

For the most part their course carried them through a virgin forest of oak, chestnut, hickory and other broad-leaved trees, clothing the ridges, the slopes and most of the valleys. Occasionally the stallion chose his own way, though as a rule he followed the narrow trails made by the deer; but when in the early forenoon he found a broader path through the woods, well-marked and evidently often used, he turned into it unhesitatingly and followed it without swerving. The wild horse of the southwestern savannahs recognized this path at once. It was one of the highways of the buffalo herds, a road

trodden deep and hard through many centuries by thousands of hoofs.

The buffalo were far less abundant now on the eastern side of the mountains. Although the white men's settlements were still confined to a strip along the coast, white hunters sometimes penetrated the foothills and white traders encouraged the taking of pelts. The deer still abounded in almost incredible numbers, but the eastern buffalo herds were withdrawing gradually across the Appalachians. Small droves, however, still ranged the eastern foothills and kept open the deep-worn paths; and the main buffalo roads across the mountain barrier, wider than the narrow buffalo ruts of the western plains, were still highways for wild creatures of many kinds. It was one of these main roads that the chestnut stallion and his mares were following; a road which would lead them with many windings down from the mountains into the hills and through the hills to the broad belt of rolling lands beyond which lay the swamps and savannahs of the Atlantic plain.

All that forenoon the Raven trailed his quarry. Both to the roan stallion and to his rider the trail was a plain one; and when the tracks of the wild horses turned into the buffalo path, the Raven knew that he had only to follow that highway through the woods. With a guttural word he re-

strained Manito-Kinibic's savage eagerness. So long as the wild horses kept to the buffalo road the task of following them would be simple. The Raven preferred that for the present the chestnut stallion should not know that he was pursued.

Half a bowshot ahead of the young warrior a troop of white-tails crossed the path, following a deer trail leading down the slope to a laurel-bordered stream. Once, at a greater distance, he saw a puma come out of the woods into the path, sit for a moment on its haunches, then vanish at a bound into the forest on the other side. Again and again wild turkeys ran into the woods on either hand, seldom taking wing; and with monotonous regularity ruffed grouse rose a few paces in front of him and whirred swiftly away.

About noon he killed a cock grouse in the path, pinning the bird to the ground with a light cane arrow tipped with bone; and he had scarcely remounted when around a curve of the path appeared the shaggy bulk of a huge buffalo bull. A moment the great beast stood motionless, blinking in astonishment, his massive head hanging low. Then, with surprising nimbleness, he turned and darted around the bend of the trail.

The Raven heard the stamping and trampling of many hoofs and gave Manito-Kinibic his head. The roan bounded forward and almost in an instant

reached the bend of the path. At a word from his rider he halted; and the Raven, quivering with excitement, gazed with shining eyes upon a spectacle which sent the blood leaping through his veins—a herd of twenty buffalo pouring out of the path, crowding and jostling one another as they streamed down the mountainside through the woods, following a deer trail which crossed the buffalo road almost at right angles. Twice the young warrior bent his bow and drew the shaft to the head; and twice he lowered his weapon, unwilling to kill game which he must leave to the wolves.

Afternoon came and still the Raven rode on through the teeming mountain forest, following the deep-worn highway which the migrating herds through unknown centuries had carved across the Overhills. More keenly than ever now his eyes searched the path ahead. The wild stallion and his mares had probably grazed abundantly in Long Meadow before their early morning rest had been interrupted; but by this time they should be hungry again, for since leaving Long Meadow they had not stopped to feed. Wherever the Raven saw the forest open a little ahead of him so that grass grew under the far-spaced trees, he halted and listened carefully. Before long in one of these grassy places he should find the three wild horses grazing, and he wished to avoid frightening them

The path, which heretofore had wound around the mountain shoulders, dipped suddenly into a deep gorge-like valley at the bottom of which a torrent roared. The forest here was close and dark. The wild horses would not halt in this valley, for there was no grass to be had; and for a time the Raven relaxed his vigilance, letting his eyes stray from the path ahead.

From a tall hemlock on the mountainside a wild gobbler took wing, sailing obliquely across the valley, and the Raven saw an eagle, which had been perching on a dead tulip poplar, launch himself forward in swift pursuit. The young brave turned on his horse's back, gazing upward over his shoulder, eagerly watching the chase.

Without warning, Manito-Kinibic reared, swerved to the right and plunged forward. His rider, taken utterly by surprise, lurched perilously, yet somehow kept his seat. For an instant, as Manito-Kinibic reared again, the Raven saw a sinewy naked arm raised above a hideous grinning face daubed with vermilion and black. Steel-fingered hands clutched the Raven's leg; on the other side another hand clawed at his thigh. Out from the thicket into the path ahead leaped three more warriors, feathered and plumed with eagle-tails and hawk-wings, striped and mottled with the red and black paint of war. More dreadful than

the hunting cry of the puma, the shrill war-whoop of the Muskogee split the air.

But for Manito-Kinibic the Rattlesnake, the chase of the chestnut stallion would have ended then. But the Muskogee war-party which way-laid Corane the Raven in the pass, hoping to take him alive for slavery or the torture, failed to reckon with the temper and strength of the mighty roan.

In an instant Manito-Kinibic had become a rearing snorting fury, a raging devil of battering hoofs and gleaming teeth. The Raven saw one Muskogee go down before the plunging roan stallion. He saw another whose shoulder was red with something that was not war paint. He saw the three warriors in the path ahead leap for their lives into the thicket as Manito-Kinibic charged down upon them. Bending low on his horse's neck, he heard an arrow speed over him and, a half-second later, another arrow. Then, remembering that he was the son of a war captain, he rose erect, looked back, and flourishing the hand which still held his bow and spear, hurled at his enemies the Cherokee whoop of triumph.

Thenceforward for a time the Raven watched the path behind rather than the path ahead. The war parties of the Muskogee were often mounted, and the young Cherokee thought it likely that this party had horses concealed in the thickets near the path.

They would probably pursue him, but with Manito-Kinibic under him he was safe. Yet for a while he gave the sure-footed roan his head, racing onward as swiftly as the uneven surface of the trail allowed. So it happened that he was driven by necessity into doing the thing which he had intended to avoid.

A mile beyond the scene of the ambush the valley widened. Here, encircled by forested heights, lay a level, sun-bathed meadow, sweet with clover and wild pea vine. Northwind and his mares had traveled far and fast. Urged on by his restless eagerness to get out of the dark forbidding mountains, perhaps impelled, too, by some mysterious premonition of danger, the great chestnut horse had permitted no halt for food. In this beautiful vivid green oasis in the wilderness of woods he halted at last.

The meadow was dotted with grazing deer. Clearly no enemy lurked there. With a joyful whinny Northwind turned aside from the path and led his consorts to the feast.

A half-hour later, an instant before the wariest of the whitetails had caught the warning sound, the wild stallion raised his head suddenly, listened intently for a moment, then, with a peremptory summons to the mares, trotted slowly with high head and tail towards the lower end of the meadow.

Because wild creatures do not ordinarily rush headlong through the forest, he miscalculated the speed of the intruder whose hoof-beats he had heard. He was still near the middle of the meadow, while the mares, loath to leave the clover beds, were far behind him, when he saw the Raven on Manito-Kinibic dash out of the woods.

The young brave heard the wild stallion's snort of surprise, saw him leap forward and race for the buffalo path, while the mares wheeled and galloped off to the left. In long beautiful bounds the stallion skimmed over the grass to the meadow's lower end where the path reentered the forest. There he disappeared amid the trees.

The damage having been done, the Raven let Manito-Kinibic do his best for two or three miles. But the wild horse ran like the north wind which blows across the summit of Unaka Kanoos. It was then that the Raven named him, in honor of that north wind which is the swiftest and keenest of all the winds of the mountains. Until his rider checked him, Manito-Kinibic ran a good race. But they saw the wild stallion no more that day.

Even among the Cherokees, great hunters and marvelously skilful trackers, it was considered a noteworthy thing that Corane the Raven and Man-

ito-Kinibic the Rattlesnake were able to follow the trail of the chestnut stallion all the way from the eastern slope of the Overhills to the Low Country of the Atlantic coast, more than two hundred miles as the white man reckons distance. Certain circumstances aided the pursuers. Nearly always Northwind kept to the game paths. Until he was well out of the mountains he followed the buffalo road. For many miles through the upper foothills he used the narrow paths trodden out by the deer. Always he chose those paths which led him south or southeast, following the slope of the land.

When he passed from the foothills into the rolling country where the forest was more open and where many prairie-meadows lay embosomed in the woods, the Raven's problem was somewhat harder; and in the Low Country of the coastal plain, so utterly unlike his mountain home, there were moments when the young warrior saw defeat staring him in the face. Yet it was evident that the wild stallion himself was not at home in this land of dense cypress swamps and towering pinewoods, of vast canebrakes and wide wastes of rushes, of dark sluggish rivers winding silently through moss-draped mysterious forests.

If this was the land which some deep-seated instinct had impelled him to seek, it was evidently not what he had expected it to be—not a land like

that which he had known westward of the mountains. It was rich beyond measure, affording pasturage of numerous kinds. But in many respects it was strange to him, and his first night within its borders taught him that it bristled with dangers.

He rested that night near the end of a long woods-prairie or open savannah close to a tall cane-brake bordering a great swamp. In the late afternoon he had grazed in the savannah amid herds of deer and flocks of tall gray cranes. The air was melodious with the songs of numberless birds. Over him, as he cropped the grass, passed many wild turkeys coming in from the woods to their roosts in the giant pines of the swamp. Around the margins of a marshy pond scores of graceful milk-white *égrets* walked to and fro amid hundreds of smaller herons of darker plumage. To the stallion it seemed that he had come to a land of plenty and of peace where no enemies lurked.

The night revealed his mistake. The swamp rang with the cries and roars of hunting beasts and with the long-drawn resonant bellowings of great alligators—a fearful chorus of the wilderness such as he had never heard before. Twice he saw round fiery eyes glaring at him out of the darkness. Once his nose told him that near at hand in the cane-brake a puma was passing along one of the winding pathways through the canes. Sleep was impossible;

yet, the night being very black, he judged it unsafe to move, fearing to run upon an invisible enemy. He spent the long hours standing, tense and rigid, his senses strained to the utmost, expecting each moment to feel the fangs or claws of some unknown foe.

How long the chestnut stallion remained in the wild swamp region of the Low Country cannot be told. Probably not long, for while food was abundant, the perils were too many. Nor can it be related how he avoided those perils and found his way at last to the edge of the wide salt marshes between the Low Country mainland and the barrier islands along the sea. Day after day Corane the Raven and Manito-Kinibic the 'Rattlesnake' followed him in his wanderings; and day after day the Raven, patient with the long patience of his race, held fast to the resolution which he had formed at the beginning—the resolution not to attempt the capture of the wild stallion until the time should be fully ripe.

He had to wait long for that time, but in one respect fortune favored the young warrior. Except for the Muskogee ambush in the mountain pass, he suffered no interference at the hands of man and indeed saw scarcely a human face between the Overhills and the coast. Even when he had reached the white men's country—where, however, the set-

84 THE WAY OF THE WILD

lements were still small and sparse—the wild horse's fear of human enemies kept both himself and his pursuers out of man's way. The spot where the long chase had its ending was as lonely as the remotest wilderness.

To Northwind, after his long journey, that spot seemed a paradise. To Corane the Raven, viewing it cautiously from the cover of the woods about noon of a warm cloudless June day, it seemed to combine all the conditions essential for his success. A dry level meadow carpeted with short thick grass and shaped like a broad spearhead, lay between a converging river and creek which came together at the meadow's lower end. There, and for some distance along the shore, the land sloped sharply to the river, forming a little bluff about ten feet in height; while beyond the river lay vast marshes stretching for miles towards the hazy line of woods on the barrier isles.

The Raven took in these things at a glance; noted, too, with satisfaction that here and there in the meadow stood clumps of some dense, stiff-branched bush of a kind unknown in the mountains. Then, well pleased, his plan complete to the smallest detail, he let his eyes rest again upon that feature of the scene which was the most important and most gratifying of all.

Almost in the center of the meadow stood North-

wind, the wild stallion, alert, arrogant, confident, a picture of lithe, clean-cut beauty and perfectly proportioned strength. But he no longer stood alone. Just beyond him grazed five mares, all of them bays and all of them of one size and build. The Raven knew at once that they were not wild horses and he surmised that they were strays from the white men's stock. But it mattered little whence they had come. The essential fact was that Northwind had taken them as his own, had become their master and protector.

Two hours before midnight, when the moon, almost at the full, swung high above the marshes beyond the river and the grassy expanse of the meadow was bathed in ghostly light, the Raven led Manito-Kinibic from his hiding place in the woods to the edge of the open. There the young brave halted. The big roan, his nostrils tingling with a scent which set his blood on fire, needed no word of instruction. He knew his part and would play it perfectly. Quivering with eagerness, yet too well trained to give way to the fury that possessed him, Manito-Kinibic moved out into the meadow at a slow walk, his hoofs making no sound.

The Raven waited until the roan had become a dim uncertain shape in the moonlight. Then, crouching low, the Indian stole to the nearest bush-clump, thence to another isolated thicket, and

thence by a roundabout course to a third. He was halfway down the meadow when he heard the wild stallion's challenge and knew that Manito-Kinibic's keen nose had led the roan straight to his goal. Bending close to the ground, sometimes creeping on all fours, sometimes crawling like a snake, the Raven moved from bush-clump to bush-clump towards the sound.

A fresh breeze blew from the sea across the marshes. The wild stallion, resting with his mares near the meadow's lower end where the creek and river joined, could neither smell nor hear an enemy approaching from the direction of the woods. Manito-Kinibic was scarcely fifty paces distant when Northwind saw him.

A moment the wild horse stood at gaze, his muscles tense for the long leap which would launch him forward in swift flight. Then fear passed out of him and fury took its place. A glance had shown him what the intruder was—a lone stallion, riderless, unaccompanied by man, roaming at will and evidently seeking the bay mares. Loud and shrill rang Northwind's challenge. Instantly he charged his foe.

Manito-Kinibic the Rattlesnake was a veteran of many battles. The fiercest battle of his career was the one which he fought that night in the moonlit meadow where the long chase of the chestnut

stallion had its end. Northwind, too, had conquered many rivals to make good his mastery of the wild horse herds; but never before had he faced an antagonist as formidable as the burly roan. With Manito-Kinibic lay the advantage of size and weight; with the wild horse the advantage of quickness and agility. In courage neither surpassed the other. In cunning each was the other's match.

Almost at once they took each other's measure and, despite their fury, fought with instinctive skill, each striving to utilize to the utmost those powers in which he excelled. After his first whirlwind charge, Northwind did not charge again. He knew after that first onset that he must not hurl himself recklessly against the roan's weight and bulk. This was an enemy too big to be overwhelmed; he must be cut to pieces with slashing hoofs and torn to ribbons with ripping, raking teeth. Hence the wild stallion whirled and circled, feinted and reared, dashed in and leaped clear again, like a skilful rapier-man whose opponent wields a broadsword—and wields it well.

For Manito-Kinibic was no blundering bruiser whose sole reliance was his strength. He, too, fought with cunning and skill, manœvering with a lightness which belied his bulk, parrying and thrusting with an adroitness not much inferior to that of his opponent. But, apparently realizing the advan-

tage which his weight gave him, he strove from the first for close quarters. Furiously, incessantly he forced the fighting, seeking to grip and hold his elusive enemy, rearing high to crush the wild horse with his battering hoofs, plunging forward with all his weight to drive his mighty shoulder against his foe and hurl him to the ground.

It was a fight too furious to last long. A stallion's hoofs and teeth are fearful weapons. A few minutes more must have brought a bloody end to the battle, though no man can say what that end would have been. Suddenly from a bush-clump a shadow darted, sped lightly across the grass, and vanished in a tuft of tall weeds. Northwind did not see it because it was behind him. If Manito-Kinibic saw it he gave no sign.

The battling stallions wheeled and reared, biting and plunging, striking with their forefeet, thrusting, parrying, feinting. Once more the roan hurled himself forward, his small eyes gleaming red, his teeth bared, his heavy hoofs stabbing the air; and once more his slim, long-maned opponent, light as a dancer, lithe as a panther, whirled aside, escaping destruction by an inch.

Again, as they fenced for an opening, rearing high, snorting and squealing, the wild horse's back was turned to the clump of weeds; and again the

shadow darted forward, swiftly, noiselessly, gliding over the turf.

Next moment Corane the Raven crouched close behind the chestnut stallion. A half-second more, and he had swung his rawhide thong with the skill for which he was famous. Then, with a shout, he leaped for Manito-Kinibic's head.

Northwind was down. He lay on his side, motionless as a dead thing. The rawhide thong, weighted at its ends, was wrapped around his hind legs, binding them tightly together. The greatest miracle was not the skill with which the Raven had thrown his snare. More wonderful still was the quelling of Manito-Kinibic's battle-fury, the swiftness with which his master brought the raging roan under control. Yet this was merely the result of teaching, of long painstaking instruction. Corane the Raven, the most successful horse-hunter among the Cherokees, owed his success partly to the peculiar methods which he employed and partly to the perfect training of his famous roan.

Manito-Kinibic, his neck and shoulders bloody, his flanks heaving, stood quietly, gazing down at his fallen foe with eyes in which the fire of hatred still glowed; but Northwind, his silky sides streaked with red, lay inert, inanimate, seeming scarcely to

breathe. He offered no resistance as the Raven with deft fingers slipped a strong hobble around the slim forelegs and made it fast above each fetlock. There was no terror, no fierceness in the wild horse's large eyes. Instead they seemed singularly calm and soft, as though the brain behind them were lulled with a vision of places far away and days long ago.

Yet, if the chestnut stallion, a prisoner at last, dreamed of some green, daisy-sprinkled forest-prairie beyond the mountains, the dream passed quickly. Presently the Raven removed the thong which had held Northwind's hind legs helpless; and instantly the wild horse came to life, panic-stricken, furious, frantic for his freedom.

For a moment he thought himself free. His hind legs were no longer bound. The hobble around his forelegs bound them only loosely. With a snort he heaved upward and leaped away in mad flight—only to pitch headlong to the ground with a force which almost drove the breath from his body. Up he scrambled once more and down again he plunged as his fettered forelegs crumpled under him. Five times he rose and five times he fell before he seemed to realize his helplessness.

For several minutes, then, he lay utterly still. The Raven had remounted Manito-Kinibic. The wild horse could not escape; yet it was well to be

prepared for whatever might happen. The ordeal might be over in an hour, or, on the other hand, many hours might pass before Northwind's spirit was broken.

At last he struggled to his feet. The Raven circled him on the roan, watching him keenly. The captive's frenzy seemed to have passed. He was cooler now, steadier on his legs. Sudden anxiety which was almost panic gripped the young Indian. He recalled that once he had seen a hobbled wild horse travel a distance of half a bowshot in short labored bounds before falling; and in a flash he had become aware of a danger hitherto unrealized.

Quickly he slipped from Manito-Kinibic's back and approached Northwind from behind, uncoiling the weighted rawhide thong which he had removed from the wild stallion's hind legs. He would snare those hind legs again and thus make certain of his captive.

By a margin of moments he was too late. Northwind wheeled, bounded forward, and this time he did not fall. He had learned what not one hobbled wild horse in a thousand ever discovered—that while a leap of normal length would throw him every time, he could travel at least a little distance at fair speed if his leaps were very short.

Another bound he made, another and another—

stiff-legged, labored, heart-breaking—keeping his balance by a miracle. He was more than halfway to the river's edge when the hobble threw him, and though he fell heavily, almost in an instant he was on his feet again, bounding onward as before.

On the very verge of the low bluff the Raven, who had remounted as quickly as possible, drove Manito-Kinibic against the chestnut's flank in a last attempt to turn or throw him. Reeling from the blow, Northwind staggered on the brink. Then, rallying his strength for a supreme effort, he plunged sideways down the steep slope, and the water closed over him.

Some say he was drowned. The Raven never saw him again, though the moon shone brightly on the river. But the water is very deep beside that bluff and there the ebb tide is very strong and swift. It might have borne him quickly beyond the Indian's vision; and since the hobble allowed his forelegs some freedom of action, he might have made shift to swim.

At any rate, when Dunmore the trader told the story of the chestnut stallion that night in Nick Rounder's tavern, an old seafaring man, who was present pricked up his ears and asked the trader certain questions. Then, with a great show of

wonder and a string of sailors' oaths, he spun a queer yarn.

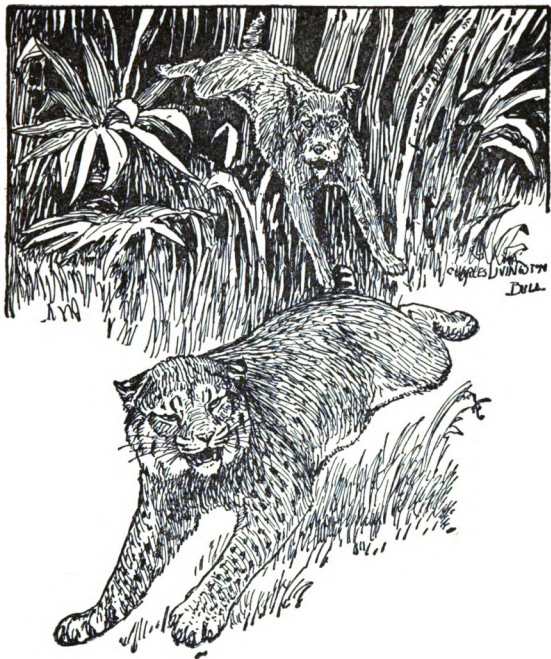
One midnight, he said, while his ship lay at anchor in a river-mouth between two barrier islands, the lookout sighted a big chestnut horse coming down the river with the tide. They manned a boat, got a rope over the horse's head and towed him to the sandy island shore. He seemed almost exhausted, his neck and shoulders were cut and bruised, and how he had come into the river was a mystery since his forelegs were hobbled. They could not take the horse aboard their vessel; so, after cutting the hobble, they left him lying on the beach, apparently more dead than alive. They expected to see his body there in the morning, but when they weighed anchor at sunrise he was gone.

Dunmore believed the old man's story; but others held that he had invented the tale on the spur of the moment, in the hope that the trader would stand him a noggin of rum. However that may be, an odd legend exists today on the barrier islands of the Carolina coast.

The story runs that the slim wiry ponies of those islands, rovers of the beaches and marsh flats, have in their veins the blood of De Soto's Andalusian horses abandoned nearly four centuries ago in the Mississippi wilderness six hundred miles away, beyond the mountains.

94 THE WAY OF THE WILD

It seems a fantastic legend; yet the river in which Northwind made his last desperate bid for freedom passes quickly to the sea between two of those barrier isles.



Rusty Roustabout

RUSTY ROUSTABOUT

HALF hour after dawn Long John Larkin, the engineer, and Philip Lee, the negro deck hand, saw an ugly thing. They had fought a good fight until then—an almost hopeless fight against a furious southwest gale which long ago had smashed the Sea Swallow's rudder and was now driving the thirty-foot launch toward breakers which would annihilate her. Capt. Mat Norman had directed that fight with the coolness and skill which Larkin and Lee had learned to expect of him in all emergencies. Then, as though some nerve within him had snapped, he seemed to go suddenly insane with fear.

He shouted something to Larkin, but his voice was cracked from much yelling against the gale, and the wind whirled his words away unheard. Then he tried to throw Larkin overboard. Long John was the bigger man and shook him off. Next he made for Lee, and the negro, his face the color of ashes, seized a heavy bar of iron and warned him back.

Keeping his footing with difficulty, Norman stag-

gered across the cockpit and into the cabin. In a moment he reappeared, bringing with him Rusty, the little red Irish terrier that for four years had been a member of the Sea Swallow's crew. He flung the dog into the black, raging sea, then sprang at Larkin, his arms outstretched, evidently hoping to push the engineer over the side.

Long John ducked, falling forward into the cockpit, and Norman, unable to check his onset, plunged headlong into the ocean.

So, thirty minutes later, Larkin and Lee went with the Sea Swallow into the white inferno of the breakers, believing that Mat Norman, the coolest man that either of them knew, had gone mad with terror in the storm. Rusty, the little Irish terrier, would have told them if he could that they were mistaken, for he knew the man who was his god better than either Lee or Larkin knew him. Rusty would have told them that what Norman did was the right thing to do—that if they had jumped when Norman tried to make them jump, they might have escaped death even as Rusty himself escaped it.

The launch was driving toward the shoals and sand bars of the inlet. There she must inevitably be smashed to matchwood and every man in her would be pounded to a pulp. To stay with her was certain death. To jump and swim for it before she

entered the inlet's shallow mouth was the only chance, and Norman alone had been cool enough to recognize it. Rusty might not have been able to explain all this in detail; but if he had perished in the huge ocean surges into which his master had hurled him, he would have gone down knowing that Norman had done for him all that any man could do. Of this sort was Rusty's love and Rusty's faith.

The sun was two hours high when the little red dog came ashore. A great white-maned comber tossed him on the upper beach and left him there, to all outward seeming stone dead. A long while he lay where the wave had left him, sprawled on his side, limp and motionless. With that wave the storm tide reached its crest; and, magically, when the tide had turned and the ebb had set in, the wind, which had slackened to a stiff breeze, died away altogether, the gray blanket vanished from the face of the sky and the warm May sunshine fell like a blessing upon beach and ocean. Of all this Rusty, inert on the white sand, the flame of life flickering feebly in his brine-soaked body, knew nothing. Nor did he know that the grim storm scavengers of the aerial patrol were abroad and that already their scouts had spied him from the upper air.

From all directions they came, hurrying on wide somber wings to the feast—first one, then another, then a third, then five more arriving all at once. They were black vultures, all of them, cowardly carrion feeders, yet bold enough to pick the eyes from helpless living victims; but not until twelve of them stood on the sands around the spot where Rusty lay did the boldest make a forward move. His first awkward hop was the signal for a general onset. Long hooked beaks backed by hideous naked heads were reaching for Rusty's eyes, scaly, sharp-clawed feet were trampling his body, when with an angry snarl a lithe tawny beast charged into the midst of the mob. For a moment there was a mad confusion of wildly beating black pinions to the accompaniment of hisses and growls. Then, as the vultures scattered in all directions and, running awkwardly to get a start, rose with swift, powerful wing beats, the big wildcat turned to examine his find.

What he saw amazed him. He had expected nothing like this. A dead fish was what he had hoped for, or, failing that, a dead sea bird—titbits which were much to his liking and for which he was accustomed to search the beaches after storms. Generally, these beach hunts of his were conducted by night; but this storm had not ended until well after dawn, and he knew that if he waited until

the following evening the vultures and buzzards, marvelously efficient watchers of the sands, would forestall him and take for themselves whatever savory morsels the gale had brought to his island. So the old lynx had compromised with caution, the caution which forbade him to patrol the open beach by day.

All morning he had been slinking like a ghost along the fringe of the jungle, keeping carefully under cover, pausing often to peer out from his leafy shelter and search the bare white strand above high-water mark. The wind had driven the tide much higher than usual, though by no means as high as in the great hurricanes that came now and then in late summer and fall. It was scarcely ten yards from the jungle's margin to the strip of soft sand where the waves had deposited whatever storm victims they had brought; and three times the lynx, after making sure that no foeman was in sight, had made a quick dash out into the open, picked up something in his jaws and slunk back to the green covert of the thicket's edge.

His first find was a least tern, a bird so small that it had merely whetted his appetite. Next, the sharply contrasting black-and-white plumage and crimson bill of a dead oyster-catcher caught his eye. This was a more satisfying meal; and after he had also found and devoured a turnstone and

a black-breasted plover, which he discovered lying side by side on the slope of a low dune, his hunger was temporarily appeased. Nevertheless, curiosity led him to wander a half mile farther along the jungle edge; and when, just after rounding a little myrtle-grown hillock, he saw the vultures grouped about a reddish object on the upper beach, he jumped to the conclusion that here at last was the delicacy for which he had been looking—a freshly killed fish, probably a small surf bass. A quick glance showed him that the coast was clear and he charged the vultures instantly.

The discovery that the object which had attracted the scouts of the air patrol was not a bass, but a small red dog, worked a sudden and startling change in the big wildcat. He jumped five feet to the right and crouched close to the sand, tawny body quivering, pale eyes glinting, white fangs gleaming in snarling jaws. Into his brain like specters out of the dim past rushed a host of hateful memories; memories of a day of terror when, as a half-grown cub, he had seen his mother torn to pieces by a pack of dogs and he himself had escaped by a miracle to nurse a long gash on his flank which had tortured him for days.

Since then he had hated and feared dogs above all other enemies, hating them almost as much as he feared them. They seldom came to his lonely bar-

rier island, separated from the mainland by a waste of marsh through which wound many deep tidal creeks; but when they did come, to trail the deer through the dense island thickets and set the green jungle ringing with wild, terrible, fierce music, the lynx always sought his safest refuge and lay there trembling and growling, living again that day of terror long ago and the days of agony that followed it.

Those memories gripped him now. As he crouched on the sand six feet from Rusty's motionless form, the fear which shook his yellow-brown striped and spotted body struggled with the hate glaring out of his savage eyes. He knew instantly that the dog was alive. His first impulse bade him flee; but though his nostrils reeked with the dog scent and his heart was cold with the fear which that scent inspired, his eyes told another story and stirred another emotion.

They told him that this dog was small, little more than half his own size and weight; that it was weak to the point of impotence, utterly powerless to defend itself, unconscious of the lynx's presence, insensible or asleep. Little by little, as he watched, hate triumphed over fear; and little by little, as the minutes passed, the glare of those round unwinking eyes grew more savage and more sinister. Here was an easy victory, a safe and swift revenge. One

long leap, one deep thrust of needle teeth meeting point to point in the throat, and the thing was done.

Suddenly all sense of fear vanished. Ears flattened, fangs gleaming, the lynx bunched his sinewy body for the spring.

Rusty, the red Irish terrier, was dreaming—dreaming of old days on the Sea Swallow with Mat Norman, of quiet voyages along the winding marsh creeks behind the barrier islands, of venturesome trips on the open ocean when fair weather tempted the Sea Swallow's skipper to save time and distance by passing from inlet to inlet outside the island chain. On a sudden the dream ended. Rusty stirred restlessly and opened his eyes. Slowly and feebly he raised his head and looked about him.

Around the arc of a half-circle his gaze swept a peaceful panorama of sea and sky and sloping, clean-swept strand. Then the movement of his head ceased, his body quivered, the short wiry hair of his nape and back stiffened and stood erect.

Wide, round, pale yellow eyes, stern and cruel as death, glared into his; eyes aglow with fierce fires of hate, yet hard and cold as jewels; eyes set in a broad, bearded face of implacable ferocity. As if by some compelling hypnotic power, they held Rusty spellbound and motionless; and, sudden and swift as the stab of a sword, fear entered Rusty's heart. For a fraction of time his life hung by a thread.

The big lynx, poised and tense for the spring, would have launched himself forward instantly at the slightest sign of weakness, and the dog, faint and sick after his battle with the sea, must have perished almost without a struggle.

But Rusty Roustabout II was Irish terrier to the core. He was the son of kings. To Champion Breda Mixer his pedigree went back, and the blood in his veins was the pure blood of those little red dogs of North Ireland which long ago were dubbed "Dare-devils" by men who counted courage the cardinal virtue in dog or man. Only for a moment did cold terror chill his heart and paralyze his faculties. In an instant he threw it off and was himself again—the heedless, reckless, headlong little bravo whose delight in picking fights with dogs too big and heavy for him to handle was a constant source of pride and anxiety to his master whenever the Sea Swallow tied up at the city wharves to discharge or take on freight.

Perhaps it was the habit, characteristic of his breed, of striking first and considering consequences afterward which made him do what he now did. Perhaps some deep-seated instinct guided him; or possibly, in some mysterious way, he read a secret in those glassy savage eyes and knew on the instant that one thing and one thing only could save him. Be that as it may, he did that thing.

Summoning all his strength for the effort, he rose to his feet and with every hair a bristle, short stubby tail erect as a flagpole, white teeth gleaming in long strong jaws, he stalked stiffly forward, then charged.

The wildcat, crouched for the leap, his brain on fire with the hate which for the moment had conquered his fear, shot forward and upward as though propelled by a catapult. Set on hair-trigger as he was, nothing could have stopped him; for an infinitesimal fraction of a second it seemed that Rusty's desperate attack had been launched too late. It had, indeed, come too late to forestall the cat's assault; but the terrier's swift and sudden advance cut in half the distance between the two antagonists, and the lynx's muscles had been keyed to drive his body forward that distance and not an inch less. So when he leaped he leaped too high and too far; and at the very instant when the terrier's legs gave way under him and he crumpled on the sand, the long tawny body of the cat flashed over him, one hind claw raking his head.

Slowly the dog, his forehead streaming with blood, struggled to his feet and faced about on tottering legs to meet the furious charge which he expected. Ten yards away across the sands he saw his foe racing with long bounds toward the green wall of jungle beyond the low sand hills of the upper beach. Once and once only the lynx looked

back; and Rusty, sitting on his haunches because once more his hind legs had given way, sent after him a bark of triumph and defiance.

This was the first meeting of Rusty, the little red Irish terrier, sometime member of the launch *Sea Swallow's* crew, and Longclaw, the big bay lynx, who for ten years or more had been king of all the preying beasts of the long narrow barrier island to which Rusty came by the grace of Providence when the *Sea Swallow* met her end. It was a strange whim of fate which brought the two together, for there was only one man who knew Longclaw the lynx and that one was Mat Norman, Rusty's master and god.

It was Norman who had given Longclaw his name. Woodsman as well as boatman, the *Sea Swallow's* skipper sometimes stopped at this island between the marshes and sea to spend a half day looking for sea-turtle nests in the sands, if the season was the season of turtles, or to wander in the dense woods of palmetto and pine, gnarled, stunted live oak and evergreen cassena, which covered the island's interior and in which many wild things had their homes. Several times on these trips Norman had noted the tracks of an unusually large wildcat, the largest wildcat tracks that he had ever seen. Be-

cause he delighted in studying the wild things, he always left Rusty on the launch when he landed on the island, for the terrier was of too restless and lively a temperament for patient watching in the woods; and because he had a habit of giving names to all the wild creatures with which he became acquainted, Norman dubbed the big bay lynx Long-claw and wove romantic fancies about the velvet-footed, mysterious haunter of the jungle glooms.

A creature of mystery he was, in truth; a ghostly, sinister, uncanny presence; a dim, elusive shape, seeming scarcely more tangible than the darkness through which he moved on feet that made no sound. To Norman he was the very spirit of the wild uncouth island forest, grotesque and inhospitable, bristling with needle-pointed yuccas and long-spined cactuses—a dense, almost impenetrable, palm-shadowed jungle, utterly unlike the beautiful woods of the Low Country mainland, yet alluring with an outlandish tropical enchantment of its own. Norman, on his visits to this fastness, searched often for the big lynx, but not in order to harm him. His tracks in the sand gave the man a thrill of joy whenever he came upon them; and the island wilderness was all the more fascinating, all the more alluring, because somewhere in its hidden depths lurked this secretive spectral follower of the night trails.

In spite of all his seeking and watching, Norman

saw the lynx but once, and then only for an instant. But a time came when Rusty, the Irish terrier, might have told his master much about the great wildcat Longclaw, into whose domain the storm had flung the little red dog to wage a long war with the jungle's tawny mysterious lord. Meanwhile, however, weeks and months were to pass—weeks and months during which Rusty, the castaway, learned to live the new life to which fate had assigned him.

It was a slow process, that learning; yet even at the beginning, Rusty's wits met the first and most important test—the problem of sustenance. Twenty yards from the spot where the dog had been washed ashore, a white-and-gray bird dropped down to the sand on quivering pointed wings and presently ran on long slender legs to a tall clump of beach grass well above high-tide mark. Soon came another and another, while overhead still others circled and called, "Pill-will-willet, pill-will-willet, pill-will-willet." For a half hour after the lynx had disappeared Rusty lay still, exhausted by the brief exertion of that encounter; but after a while strength returned to him and he got to his feet and walked slowly up the beach. Accident rather than design turned his steps toward the grassy area where the willets nested, and one by one they rose before him to fly low over his head, crying and swooping.

He gave them no heed, not knowing the reason

for their excitement; but suddenly, as he brushed past a grass clump, something crunched under his forefoot. He had stepped squarely into a willet's nest and had broken two of the buffy, brown-blotched eggs. He ate these ravenously, then broke the two other eggs in the nest and ate them also. Conscious for the first time of his hunger, he nosed about from grass clump to grass clump and found five other nests, each containing eggs, all of which he devoured. Then, suddenly aware of a thirst which exceeded even his hunger, he pushed on across the belt of loose sand between the beach and the jungle's edge.

Luck favored him in his quest. A hundred feet within the dense wall of cassena and myrtle fringing the woods, a chain of ponds and pools extended for a quarter of a mile lengthwise of the island, fed either by rains or by obscure springs hidden amid rank reeds and rushes. As Rusty splashed along the slime-covered margin of one of these pools toward a little cove where the water growths fell away, a great milk-white bird, half as tall as a tall man, startled him as it rose with labored wing beats not more than half a dozen feet in front of him. He drank and drank and drank; then irresistible weariness came over him again and, making his way to a dry spot close to a palmetto trunk, he lay down and slept for hours.

When he awoke dusk had come to the jungle. Where scrubby, stunted live oaks spread their wide branches under the pines it was already black night; and all around him in the gloom the little red dog heard sibilant, mysterious whisperings—the eerie music of the sea winds sifting through acres of palmetto fronds. A chuck-will's-widow cried shrilly in the blackness, another and another answered. Down from the air above the feathery pine tops floated the loud, guttural “quok-quok-quok” of a squadron of black-crowned night herons going forth to their fishing, and presently a homing blue heron sent down his harsh, hoarse call.

Then, as the breeze lulled, fell silence, deep and absolute; and in the grim clutch of it, with the blackness growing ever blacker, fear came into Rusty's heart again—fear and a great longing for Mat Norman, his master.

The longing abode with him, but the fear passed. It was not in his nature to be afraid; and the hunger, which the willet eggs had only temporarily appeased, would not let him lie idle in the darkness, appalled by the jungle's dreadful silences, startled by its inexplicable sounds. Soon his nose gave him tidings which made him forget all other matters in a new quest for food—a quest to which he could bring a ripe experience.

His nose told him that there were rabbits about

and Rusty was an old hand at rabbit hunting. It mattered little that these dwellers in the jungle morasses were short-legged, dark-tailed marsh rabbits and not the cottontails with which he was familiar. Indeed, it was fortunate for him that this was the case, for these marsh rabbits lacked both the wit and the speed of the cottontail. He bungled his first attempt, but the game was plentiful and a quarter of an hour later he had another chance. This time he stalked his prey more skillfully and soon had a supper suited to his needs.

Thus, at the very outset, Rusty solved the primary problem—the problem of food. If there had been nothing else, the sea birds' eggs on the sands—eggs of willet and plover, tern and skimmer—and the sluggish water-loving hares of the island pond-edges would have kept him alive for weeks. But there were many other sources of food supply besides these; and little by little—sometimes by accident, sometimes by virtue of his keen nose and sharp wits—the terrier gained knowledge of them and skill in turning them to good account.

Walking the beach one moonlight night, he came upon a raccoon busily digging in the sand twenty feet or so above high-water mark. He tried to stalk the coon, but the latter saw him and, after debating the question for a moment, decided upon flight. Rusty treed him in a young live oak just within the

edge of the jungle, then lost him as he made off along an aërial pathway passing from tree to tree. Returning to the spot where the coon had been digging, the terrier took up the work of excavation and in a few minutes unearthed a store of round white eggs, more than a hundred and fifty in all, arranged in layers in a deep cavity in the sand.

He did not know that they were the eggs of a great sea turtle which had come up out of the surf earlier that night and, after lumbering across the beach and laboriously digging a hole in the sand with her flippers, had deposited her treasures therein, covered them up and waddled ponderously back to the ocean. But Rusty found that these eggs were exceedingly good to eat and, tearing open their tough skins with his teeth, he devoured more than a score of them at one sitting.

The discovery of this nest was a stroke of luck, but by using his wits Rusty improved upon it. He had noted the wide, plainly marked trail or crawl leading from the surf to the turtle nest and back to the surf again; and several times that spring and summer he found turtle nests for himself by digging in the sand where an upward trail and a downward trail came together above reach of the tides.

In these and various other ways the little red dog made his living during the first weeks of his long

exile. At first he searched often and hopefully for his master, but little by little he realized that his search was vain. Slowly, too, realization came to him that he was a prisoner. On one side of his island lay the sea, on the other a wilderness of salt marsh, boggy and treacherous, an impassable barrier which Rusty tried only once to cross. A house, where an oyster planter had once lived, now stood deserted and desolate, half wrecked by a terrific hurricane. Rusty's ordeal in the storm had filled him with an enduring horror of the surf. For this reason he avoided the front beach as a rule and made no attempt to swim the deep inlet separating his barrier isle from the next island of the chain. But for his fear of the breakers his exile might have been shorter, for fishermen sometimes landed on the island and walked the front beach. But none of these rare human visitors entered the hot, almost impenetrable jungle behind the dunes, teeming with insects in the warm season and inhabited by many snakes.

The heat and the insects Rusty endured as best he could. Deep-seated instinct kept him safe from the ugly, thick-bodied, truculent moccasins. As time passed he grew wiser in the ways of the woods, stronger of body, keener of nose, fleet of foot. With the advancing summer the sea birds' eggs became fewer and no more turtle trails crossed the

sands. But Rusty was so good a hunter now, so well versed in the essential arts of island life, that though he occasionally encountered lean periods when hunger almost drove him to raid the vast armies of the little fiddler crabs, these intervals of ill luck were of short duration. The marsh rabbits were his main reliance, both because of their great abundance and because they were comparatively easily caught; but he varied his fare often enough to escape monotony.

Wood rats were an important source of food supply. Now and again he caught a cottontail. Several times he feasted on minks which abounded in the salt marshes behind the island. With surprising frequency he captured squirrels by taking advantage of their uncontrollable curiosity. The raccoons, however, which he often scented and not infrequently saw, were too much for him. Try as he would, he could not get to close quarters with them—which was, perhaps, just as well. Some of the island coons were fully as big as he was, and, had he managed to close with them, they might have taught him a lesson. More than one big male ring-tail seemed half inclined to accept his challenge. But on each of these occasions there happened to be a tree close at hand, and at the last moment the coon, perhaps impressed by the impetuosity of Rusty's attack, decided to avoid the issue.

There was one other island dweller whom Rusty scented sometimes, but for a long while never saw save only that once when he was so near to death—Longclaw, the big bay lynx, whose overlordship even the surliest of the old he-coons grudgingly admitted. Sometimes the red dog knew that his fierce-eyed, stealthy enemy was near; sometimes he saw the wildcat's rounded tracks; occasionally the wind brought him a scent which he recognized at once. But though Rusty often followed those tracks and sought to trace that well-remembered scent, for weeks it was Longclaw who hunted Rusty and not Rusty who hunted Longclaw.

An irresistible fascination drove the lynx to shadow the little dog, to trail him wherever he went about the island, to keep him almost constantly under observation. Early in this strange game Longclaw realized that, in spite of its doglike smell, the small, stump-tailed, rough-coated beast which had suddenly appeared upon the island was nothing like so formidable as the big gaunt hounds which the lynx feared even more than he hated them. The little red dog's woodcraft was no match for that of Longclaw. He was a tyro, a bungler, whom the lynx could easily elude; and, bold though he was, he was of insignificant stature compared with the hunting dogs that Longclaw dreaded. Three times during those first weeks the big wildcat, discovering Rusty

asleep, crept almost within leaping distance of him; and once he had all but nerved himself for the attack when the terrier awoke.

But gradually there came a change. More and more often Rusty caught the scent of Longclaw; more and more often he turned aside to follow that scent; more and more often and more and more quickly he forced his velvet-footed, ghostly attendant to beat a hasty retreat. The little dog was learning woodcraft; his nose, his eyes and his ears were serving him better; experience was teaching him the ways and the stratagems of the wild folk of the woods.

A time came when the grim game of hide and seek was no longer a ludicrously unequal contest between a novice and a master. Still, the advantage rested with Longclaw, but he could not now venture to take liberties which formerly involved no risk. At last one day Rusty worked out a scent so quickly that he caught a glimpse of his foe; and a week later he not only saw the lynx again but actually treed him in a small isolated cedar and kept him there for an hour.

This marked the beginning of a new chapter. Thenceforward Rusty was no longer content to leave the initiative with his enemy. Whether he realized in some strange way that the contest between the lynx and himself had to be fought out

to a conclusion, or whether he found in the excitement of that contest relief from his gnawing loneliness and his poignant longing for his master, the pursuit of Longclaw became his principal business in life next to the finding of food. He trailed the big wildcat in his sleep, fought with him in his dreams; and once, having driven him to take refuge in one of his dens, a leaning oak, hollow for a distance of twenty feet above the ground, Rusty stood guard within the entrance of the hollow for more than five hours before thirst finally compelled him to abandon his vigil.

Summer reached and passed its zenith. In the fierce August heats, when even the languid herons and the tall black-and-white wood ibises of the island ponds and meres seemed to droop and suffer, Rusty rested perforce. It was a struggle then to keep alive, to endure without madness the incessant attacks of the stinging and biting insects from which, when the breeze dropped, escape was all but impossible. Yet morning and evening often found the terrier on the trail again; and with brief interludes the long duel of wits and of nerve between dog and lynx, between the alien invader of the jungle and the big wildcat who had been the jungle's sovereign, continued and became more bitter and more deadly. It was an odd chance which brought the climax.

Two hours after sunrise of a crisp October morning Rusty followed a possum trail to the edge of a small open glade shaded by tall pines and ringed round by a dense hedge of young live oaks. Almost in the center of the glade stood a large palmetto; and just as the terrier reached the inner margin of the live-oak hedge he saw the possum nosing something in the pine straw near the palmetto trunk. Rusty backed into the thicket, made a short detour, then darted noiselessly into the open, keeping out of sight behind the stout trunk, bristling with the stubs of cast-off lateral fronds. When he was within six feet of the tree he heard a scuffle just beyond it; and a moment later, peering around the trunk, he saw Longclaw standing upon the body of the possum.

The big cat's back was turned to the palmetto. Crouching low on the carcass of his prey, he seemed to be scanning the farther edge of the glade, perhaps trying to discover the meaning of some faint sound which had come from that direction. From behind the tree trunk, first the head, then the wiry, compact body of the little red dog emerged. Inch by inch he moved forward across the pine-straw carpet. Then, with a joyous yelp, he leaped straight for that tawny back.

The struggle was over almost before it had begun. Two seconds after Rusty made his leap he found

himself lying against the palmetto trunk a foot above the ground, his bleeding body wedged amid the jagged sword-edged stubs of the broken fronds. Blood streamed across his face and blinded him; the red hair of his throat and chest was streaked and smeared with a more vivid red. A moment he hung dazed and helpless. Then, squirming and writhing, he got himself free and, falling sideways, sprawled for an instant on the pine straw. Scrambling to his feet, although the breath had been all but knocked out of him, he stood swaying unsteadily, brushing his forepaw across his eyes to wipe away the blood.

Fifteen feet away, near the thicket's edge, crouched Longclaw the lynx, back arched, fierce eyes a gleam, long teeth bared in a savage snarl. There was no fleck of blood on the fur of his back or flanks; but there was blood on his jaws and on his big hind feet, not his own blood, but that of his foe.

That tawny target at which Rusty had leaped had vanished as if by magic. The charging terrier had uttered his yelp of triumph a fraction of a second too soon. With incredible swiftness Longclaw had thrown himself on his back, and the little red dog had hurled himself into a battery of long, needle-pointed, slashing claws and punishing fangs.

Those fangs had seared Rusty's face above the eyes; those claws had torn long rips in the hide of

his throat and chest. The terrier's teeth, seeking a hold, had closed upon empty air. Nearly twice as large as the dog and in the prime of his powers, the wildcat could have cut his antagonist to pieces in the first half minute of the battle; but in this first phase of the duel in the jungle glade no such purpose had formed itself in Longclaw's brain.

Taken utterly by surprise, he was trying not to kill, but to escape. A moment his claws had ripped and slashed, his fangs had stabbed and torn. Next moment his jaws relaxed their hold, the claws drew back into their sheaths and a mighty thrust of the long, powerful hind legs hurled the little dog upward and backward. In an instant the lynx was on his feet and halfway across the glade.

He halted there because for a half second it seemed that the dog was dead; and he held his ground, because even when Rusty had regained his feet his helplessness was obvious. In that moment the fear in Longclaw's heart faded and vanished and his pent-up hatred of the interloper who had invaded his kingdom took full possession of him. And mingled with this hatred was contempt.

Now at last he knew that this little stub-tailed dog was nothing to be afraid of, a weak and puny creature by comparison with himself, an opponent whose amazing boldness was out of all proportion to his physical strength. Outwardly, he gave no

sign; but Longclaw the wildcat was transformed. For months he had fled from this presumptuous intruder, but that chapter was over. He had taken his enemy's measure at last and revenge was near at hand.

Perhaps Rusty, still dazed and half breathless, but steadier on his legs, his eyes freed in a measure from the blood that had blinded them, understood something of this. Possibly he was able to read the changed purpose of the lynx in those cold, steady eyes; possibly he realized, just as a man would have realized in like circumstances, the inevitable consequences of his defeat in this first encounter which was so decisive a revelation of the wildcat's overwhelming physical superiority. At all events, the dog seemed somehow aware that the headlong recklessness which had saved his life on one memorable occasion would not serve him now.

He did not charge Longclaw as he had charged him that first day on the beach. Instead, he lifted his nose high and sniffed the air. Then he began to bark, wildly, shrilly, rapidly—sharp stabs of sound, piercing, incessant, hysterical, as though a frenzy had him.

A woodsman wise in the ways of dogs might have suspected that when Rusty had tried the air with uplifted nose some strangely exciting odor, imperceptible to the lynx's duller sense, had come to him.

The average man, looking on at the drama in the glade, would have said that the terrier was beside himself with fear. To Longclaw, apparently, the dog's behavior carried this latter meaning. Those mad shrill cries seemed to the lynx a confession of irresistible, overpowering terror, and they stiffened his resolution and fanned the flame of fury in his heart.

Yet for a while the clamor in the glade confused and worried him. His muscles were taut for the first of the series of bounds which would bring him to grips with his foe; but minute after minute he delayed his charge, exultant over his enemy's obvious panic, yet a trifle nonplused by the volleys of sharp, staccato sound which filled and bewildered his ears, accustomed to the jungle silences.

At last the tumult of barking slackened and ceased. Rusty's nose was testing the air again; his ears were pricked as though to catch some longed-for, eagerly awaited answer to his summons. The big wildcat's head dropped lower, his long back bent like a bow, his four feet drew together under him. Next moment he shot forward, bounding lightly over the soft carpet of the pine straw.

Five feet from the dog he halted, turned sideways to his foe, uttered a strange, wild, long-drawn, indescribably savage cry. Then, as though his legs were steel springs, he bounced high into the air,

passed clear over the dog and, closing upon him with the swiftness of light, grappled him from behind.

Rusty Roustabout II, the light of battle in his eyes, the stubby tail which was his battle flag erect and defiant to the last, whirled as he went down under that tawny bulk and clamped his jaws upon a furry forefoot. Then, as long teeth dug into his neck and trenchant claws raked and ripped his back, he released his grip on the wildcat's paw and, writhing and twisting desperately, strove for the throat hold which alone might save him. The weight of the wildcat crushed his body to the ground. After a moment, the little red dog, redder than ever now, had almost ceased to struggle.

Mat Norman, when he landed on the island, told himself for the hundredth time that he was engaged on a fool's errand. The chances were at least ten to one that Rusty had perished in the storm. Over and over again Norman had reviewed the events of that morning, and he knew that the same current which had swept him parallel with the island beach and on into the treacherous bay had probably carried the dog to his death.

An exceptionally strong swimmer, Norman had somehow kept himself afloat, and a big seagoing

rum-runner, riding out the gale in the lee of the long sand bar at the island's northern end, had taken him from the water more dead than alive. The rum-runner's business was urgent. She put to sea hours before the half-dead man in her captain's bunk had recovered from his stupor. Norman, when he came on deck, learned that he would not see land again until the first of the Bahamas lifted above the horizon.

It happened that for months he had yearned to see the tropics. Fate, it appeared, had given him a free passage in that direction. He had no close kin to bother about and he knew that his dog was dead. From Nassau he wrote home to apprise his friends of his whereabouts. Then for some five months he knocked about the Indies and the Leewards, working his way on various sorts of craft. Presently, he had enough of it, and the end of the sixth month found him at home again on the plantation of his birth, whence he could see, far away across a wilderness of marsh, the purple woods on the barrier island off which he had parted from the doomed Sea Swallow.

Those woods beckoned him. He could not rid himself of the thought that some cross-current might have washed Rusty ashore on the island beach; and he reflected that the dog, provided he could kill game enough to subsist on, might remain for months

undiscovered by any human being, because, except in the hunting season, the few persons who visited the island seldom entered the woods. Knowing that he would be laughed at, he said nothing to anyone; but on the third day he borrowed a small boat and set out on the long row down the winding marsh creeks. He camped that night amid low sand dunes close to the surf and by sunrise he was in the island thickets.

Another man engaged in such a quest might have whooped and hallooed, hoping that the dog might hear him. But no sooner had Norman entered the jungle than his hopes died utterly. He told himself again that he had been a fool and he tried to banish Rusty from his mind. He still pushed on; but he went quietly, as was his custom in the woods, thinking thus to renew his acquaintance with some of the island wild folk, scanning the moist places for tracks of raccoon, deer and mink, searching especially for the rounded footprints of the big bay lynx that he had named Longclaw.

He thrilled with pleasure when in a sandy swale under ancient palmettos he found those footprints. It was good to know that Longclaw still lived and ruled his island kingdom, that his shadowy form still moved ghostlike and mysterious through the jungle glooms at night. Norman followed the trail eagerly. Where the sandy area ended he lost it, but

he pushed on in the direction in which the tracks had led, moving as quietly as possible, searching the sun-dappled vistas ahead. Scores of times he had followed Longclaw's trail, and only once had he been rewarded with a glimpse of the big wildcat whose presence lent enchantment to those woods. But always Norman was ready to try again on the chance that luck would favor him.

An outburst of sound, straight ahead and near at hand, stopped him in his tracks. He knew instantly that it was Rusty's voice. In the utter unexpectedness of the event there was something shocking and frightening, something deeply uncanny, something which smacked of the supernatural. For an instant Norman was obsessed by the grotesque notion that his dead dog was calling him, and for another half second he thought himself the victim of some fantastic trick of the imagination. Then, as common sense reasserted itself, he listened eagerly, studying the sounds.

It was Rusty's bark, he knew, but never before had he heard Rusty bark like that. He choked off the shout which rose to his lips and ran forward at full speed, ducking under the palmetto fronds, thankful for the pine-straw carpet which deadened the noise of his footfalls.

A dense hedge of young live oaks barred his way. He dropped on hands and knees and began to bur-

row through. Dead sticks and leaves crackled under him; but the dog's frantic, incessant barking came from just beyond the oak thicket, and Norman hoped that in the clamor the slight sounds of his approach would pass unnoticed. He was halfway through the thicket when the barking ceased. The man halted, every nerve tingling.

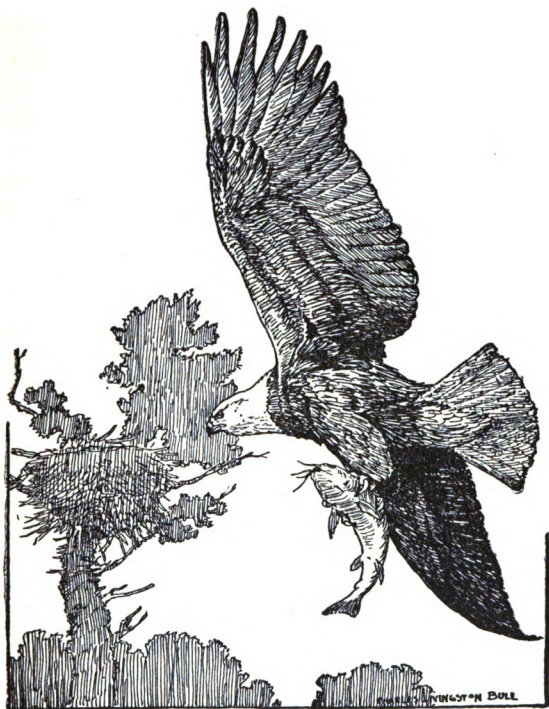
A wild, long-drawn cry, unmistakably feline, indescribably savage, galvanized him into action. Head down to shield his eyes from the stiff oak twigs, he wormed his way through the barricade to the thicket's edge.

One glance sufficed. He had no weapon, but as he raced across the glade he snatched a half-rotten stick from the ground. Longclaw the lynx, growling and mauling, his fangs red with the sweetest blood that his lips had ever tasted, saw the man when he was scarcely a dozen feet away.

For a fraction of a second the lynx seemed paralyzed. Then like a ghost he was gone. Norman sensed rather than saw a tawny streak flashing into the thicket. Then he dropped on his knees beside the torn and bleeding form at his feet.

Brown eyes, immeasurably happy, looked up into his face. A stump tail wagged feebly. A small red tongue licked his hand. Norman knew that by a margin of seconds he had come in time.

The Quest of the Eagle Stone



THE QUEST OF THE EAGLE STONE

THE dusky marshmen of Odistash have an odd legend about the bald eagle. They say that once in the lifetime of every male eagle, when he has attained the utmost fullness of courage and strength, he sets out on a journey to heaven. Launching forth from his nest in the woods, he circles upward, climbing in a spiral course towards the sky, gliding up and up on wide rigid wings until in a little while even his keen eye can no longer discern the earth beneath him.

Up and up he goes, for days and nights, passing by the moon and the stars, but keeping far from the sun so that his wings will not be burned by the fierce heat; on and on through the immensity of space, until at last, if his strength does not fail, he comes to the place where a Certain One awaits him with the prize which he desires—a stone. Hiding this stone under his feathers, the eagle sets out immediately on his long journey back to earth, and on arriving there conceals the stone in his nest and guards it jealously.

Why the eagle should desire and value this stone from some celestial valley the legend does not ex-

plain; but if a man can gain possession of it his fortune is made, for by means of the stone he can open the doors of any money vault or bank in the world. There is one condition, however, which he must observe with the greatest care. After acquiring the Eagle Stone, he must never expose it to the light of day, for if the sun touches it his rays will destroy its magic.

Now the King of Odistash, dozing on his high throne, knew nothing about this legend. His throne was a thousand feet high, and viewed from below, it was blue with buttresses of white; for the king was a big bald eagle, his throne was the sky, and its buttresses were the snowy cumulus cloud-mountains where the thundersqualls were made. In summer and early fall these squalls came crashing down upon the wide sea marshes of Odistash, sometimes forcing the king to take refuge in the thick jungle on the wild barrier island where he had his home. But this was midautumn, and since the squalls seldom came at that season, the king, soaring in the high air, paid no attention to the lightning which flashed and glowed at intervals in a tall thunderhead towering above the billowy cloud ranges to the northward. Round and round he swung, a thousand feet above the marsh plains where white herons stood like images in the shallows, and willets, yellowlegs and clapper rails walked along the

muddy margins of the sluggish streams; round and round, in wide interweaving circles, with scarcely a quiver of his black-brown wings, taking his ease in the cool soundless solitude where no living creature dared challenge his supremacy.

He had been soaring thus, more than half asleep, for nearly an hour, when suddenly his lethargy left him. His fierce yellow eyes gleamed under their beetling white brows as he checked his smooth onward course and hung for a moment suspended, his gaze fixed upon one spot in the vast panorama of russet marsh, pale-blue sea and dark-green forest within range of his vision. Then, half closing his wings, he slid swiftly down a sharply inclined plane, the wind whistling past the hard edges of his pinions. Two or three hundred feet above the marsh he extended his wings, swerved to the right, and, beating back against the fresh southwest breeze, began to circle above the actors in the marshland drama which had stirred his interest.

All through the marshes of Odistash wind many tidal creeks, twisting and turning this way and that, dividing into lesser creeks which in turn divide into little marsh brooks, filling with the flood tide which pours in through narrow inlets between the barrier islands, emptying again with the ebb. These waterways teem with life. Into them with the flood tide come the incalculable armies of the mullet; and in

pursuit of the mullet armies often come the dolphins, forsaking for the time being the clear water of the ocean along the barrier beaches to follow their favorite prey far up the winding marsh channels until the shoaling water warns them to go no farther lest they be left high and dry by the receding tide.

The eagle, sweeping and swerving in narrow circles three hundred feet in the air, looked straight down upon one of these marsh creeks at a point where a large tributary entered it. The tide was ebbing strongly and the mullet hosts were streaming down with it towards the sea; and in the midst of the mullet hosts three dolphins, swimming nearly abreast, were enjoying good hunting. They had cruised far up the creek with the rising tide and now they were returning seaward with the ebb.

The king had marked their progress up the creek, for, drowsy though he was, there was little that happened on the face of the marshes below him that he did not see; but he had watched them with rather languid interest, for at that time they were hunting in a lazy leisurely fashion which was unlikely to afford him an opportunity to levy tribute. When the tide turned, however, and began to ebb swiftly, bringing down with it the vast hordes of fish which had gone far up the smaller creeks beyond the dolphins' reach, the latter presently changed their

tactics. It was this fact that had caught the attention of the soaring eagle and brought him down from his station in the upper air so that he might be ready to take instant advantage of the opportunity which at any moment might be afforded him.

There was every sign that he would not have long to wait. The dolphins, showing six feet or so of their rounded backs above the surface, were charging the flanks of a great army of mullet which filled the wide winding creek from bank to bank and from bend to bend. Dashing at high speed into the shimmering ranks in the shallow water close to the right-hand shore, the big sea mammals, wonderfully lithe and agile in spite of their bulk, were spreading consternation among the finny phalanxes.

Swift as the mullet were, the dolphins were swifter still; and just ahead of them, as they charged side by side through the shallows, a silvery shower of fish, each of them from six to eight inches in length, curved through the air and rained down into the water. It was this rain of fish rather than the dolphins themselves that interested the eagle, circling and poising, eagerly awaiting his chance. Sooner or later, he knew, one of those leaping mullet, fleeing madly before the oncoming dolphins, would leap in the wrong direction and fall upon the mud between the marsh and the water's edge. Then, if

he could drop upon it from the air before it flopped back into the water, he would have his dinner.

A little distance downstream, around a bend of the creek, another hunter was watching and waiting. Deaf Jen Murray, famous among the negro marshmen of the Low Country for the length of his lean arms, which enabled him to cast his line twenty feet farther into the surf than the most powerful of his rivals, crouched in his little flat-bottomed punt watching the eagle with avid, crafty eyes. Jen had fished the flood tide that morning at a shell bank just below the creek bend and had made a good catch of whiting and croaker. An hour before high water, when the fish had stopped biting, he had pushed his punt into the entrance of a little gully opening into the creek. Then, bending the tall marsh grass over him to shut out the glare—and also to hide the boat from view in case a squadron of black ducks settled on the creek—he had lain down in the punt for a nap.

He had slept longer than he intended. When he was awakened by a sudden movement of the punt as it slid a foot or so on the soft mud of the gully now left nearly dry by the receding tide, the first thing that he saw through the screen of marsh blades bending above him was the eagle hovering in the air two or three hundred yards away. Slowly and very cautiously he drew his wiry body to a sitting posture

and reached stealthily for his rusty single-barreled gun.

For years Jen had known and admired the king, the greatest eagle that he had ever seen, and often he had said to himself that some day he would capture the bird. He wanted the king, not dead but alive and uninjured. A dead eagle was merely so much carrion of which he could make no use; but a living eagle, especially so fine a specimen as this one, would bring two or three dollars from some enterprising shopkeeper in the city who could draw a crowd by exhibiting the captive in his window. To Jen two dollars was a vast sum; and as the king, swerving and hovering over the charging dolphins, drew nearer and nearer, the marshman fingered his weapon eagerly and blessed the luck which seemed about to bring the big bird within fairly easy range. If the king held his course until he was almost directly over Jen's head, the marshman, who was as skillful with his gun as he was with his surf line, felt pretty confident that he could cripple one of those long wide wings and bring his victim down without serious injury.

Nearer and nearer came the king. Jen could not see the dolphins—or porpoises, as he would have called them—and, being almost stone deaf, he could not hear the swish of their big bodies through the water; but knowing the life of the marshes and the

marsh creeks as he did, he guessed the reason for the eagle's tactics. His only fear now was that the eagle's chance might come while he was still beyond easy range. The negro's white teeth clamped together as he saw the king suddenly close his wings and plunge, his head held low, his yellow talons opened wide beneath him; and as the great bird disappeared behind the tall grasses the marshman jumped to his feet, determined to shoot as soon as the eagle rose, though the distance was so great that only if good luck aided his marksmanship could he hope to bring down the quarry.

So far, at any rate, fortune favored the king. The prize that he clutched in his sharp curved claws as he stood on the sloping shore of the creek was not a mullet, but a four-pound channel bass, its red-gold back and flanks glittering in the sunlight. Hard pressed by the dolphins as it swam along in the midst of the mullet host, the bass had leaped out of the water just as the jaws of its would-be destroyer were about to close upon it. Falling in the shallows within a few inches of the shore, the fish had been washed a foot or so up the shelving muddy bank by the wave which the charging dolphins made as they rushed past; and instantly the king, rejoicing at the sight of a prize so much better than that which he had hoped for, had fallen upon it

from the air and driven his long talons into its sides.

The king stood for a few minutes upon the body of his victim, waiting until its struggles became less violent; then, spreading his wings, he rose against the wind, lifting the bass almost without effort. He was forty feet above the marsh when he saw the marshman, now standing erect, his head projecting above the tall grass, his gun at his shoulder. With a harsh scream the eagle swerved and slid down the wind, his body slanting sharply, gaining speed each instant. The gun barrel swung swiftly around a half circle, held steady a fraction of a second, then spouted flame and smoke.

The king screamed again as a numbing shock paralyzed his left wing. His claws opened, releasing the bass, while he struggled frantically to right himself in the air and check his fall. Then, as two dark brown quill feathers whirled past him spiraling downward, the numbness of his wing passed as suddenly as it had come, and with swift powerful strokes of his pinions he swept onward and upward, again on an even keel and again in full possession of his powers.

Jen Murray, the marshman, gazed after him with gleaming eyes. His charge of duck shot had merely clipped two feathers from the eagle's wing; but, at any rate, a fine bass had been added to his catch,

for he had marked the spot where the fish had fallen, and presently he would make his way across the boggy marsh and get it. This was a stroke of luck, and Jen was not inclined to complain. Moreover, an idea had come to him and a plan which he had long considered vaguely began to take shape in his mind.

Never before had he seen the king so close at hand, and never before had he realized what a truly magnificent specimen the bird was. That huge eagle, he was confident, would be worth five dollars to him if he could take it to town uninjured; and already his thoughts were busy with a scheme for accomplishing that end and perhaps at the same time accomplishing something else even more worthwhile, something which would make even the splendid sum of five dollars appear trivial and insignificant compared with the glittering wealth which would then be at his command.

Jen lost no time in putting his plan into execution. He said nothing about it to any of his acquaintances. In the first place, he wanted all the fruits of his venture for himself; and in the second place, he knew that some, though by no means all, of his neighbors would laugh at him if he told them what he had in mind. Early the next morning he

left the little house where he lived alone on the edge of the marshes, and rowed in his square-headed punt mile after mile along lonely winding marsh creeks to the back beach of one of the barrier islands stretching in a long chain between the marshes and the sea. Pulling a little way down the deep narrow inlet separating this barrier isle from the next, he landed on the sandy inlet shore and followed it to the front beach. There, at a point where a long sand spit thrust far out into the ocean, he waded into the surf and, whirling his hand line, baited with cut mullet, over his head, cast his hooks into the outermost breakers. Then he turned his back on the sea and began to search the sky.

Jen knew that somewhere in the dense semitropical jungle covering the whole interior of this barrier island the king had his nest, but he did not know exactly where the nest was, and, since the island was some six miles in length and a half mile or more in width, he wanted to get some idea of the approximate locality before beginning his search. The best way to do this, he thought, was to take his stand on the front beach and watch the sky for the king or his mate; and in planning this preliminary part of his task the marshman had decided to combine business with adventure by trying his luck with the big channel bass of the surf.

After a half hour of waiting, he felt a tremendous

tug and, jerking the line viciously, grinned with delight as he realized that he had hooked an unusually large and powerful fish.

Had he been using the rod and reel of a sportsman there would have ensued a glorious battle amid the curling breakers; but with Jen Murray fishing was not a species of play, and after the fish had somewhat spent its strength in three spirited rushes he hauled away hand over hand upon the heavy line and soon had his victim—a splendid thirty-pound bass, gleaming in the light like burnished bronze—gasp^{ing} on the beach. Then, just as he rose to his feet after unhooking the fish, he saw the king high over his head journeying in from the sea.

Jen watched the big bird eagerly and marked with care the spot where he spiraled down into the jungle. After hiding his bass in a tamarisk thicket just above high-water mark, so that the watchful turkey vultures, incessantly patrolling the sky, would not spy it from the air, he walked two miles up the lonely palm-fringed beach to a point opposite the place where the eagle had descended. On the way he saw the king, this time accompanied by his mate, rise out of the woods and, circling upward, fly straight out over the ocean.

The marshman grinned again with a gleam of white teeth upon seeing the king and his mate start seaward on what would probably be a long hunt. It

suiting his purpose admirably that they should absent themselves for a while, for it might take him some time to find the nest. As a matter of fact it took him longer than he had expected; for in those dense jungle-like woods of palmetto, pine and stunted live oak, where impenetrable thickets of cassena often barred his way, and long narrow reed-bordered lagoons of still, wine-colored water compelled him to make long and laborious detours, his progress was necessarily slow. For another reason also he picked his steps with great care. He had in unusual degree the deadly fear of snakes of all kinds, which as a rule is so strong in even the most experienced woodsmen, and he knew that in many of the barrier-island jungles the venomous cottonmouth moccasin abounded. Jen was as much a woodsman as he was a marshman and beachcomber; but, except in winter, when he sometimes trapped raccoons on another barrier island nearer his home, he kept out of these seaside jungles, with their semitropical vegetation and their vast summer populations of stinging and biting insects.

There were few insects to bother him, now that the cool weather had come. Perhaps because he was careful to give warning of his approach, he saw no moccasins nor any other wild things, except one dark-gray white-nosed fox squirrel, which peered down at him from a pine top, and three tall long-

legged black-and-white wood ibises, as big as geese, standing motionless at the edge of a small stagnant jungle pool—belated stragglers from the great ibis flocks which had sailed away to the southward as summer merged into fall. None of these interested Jen. His eyes shifted from the lush weeds and grasses and fallen palmetto fronds at his feet where hidden danger might lurk, to the tops of the pines towering above the lower growth; and finally he saw the nest, a bulky castle of sticks, seven feet or more in diameter, fixed some seventy feet above the ground in the crotch of a pine standing almost in the center of a small circular opening in the jungle.

He made his way to the base of the tree, which was rather slender in proportion to its height, studied its trunk and the arrangement of its branches just below the nest, and grinned his satisfaction. No insuperable difficulties stood in the way of his scheme; and he noted with approval too, that the eagles had evidently completed their annual repairs to the nest in preparation for the laying of the two big white eggs, an event which in the Low Country generally takes place in November.

So far so good. Searching the circle of sky visible above his head to make sure that no soaring eagle had seen him, Jen withdrew to the edge of the little opening in which the pine stood, and concealed

himself with great care in the dense cover of the surrounding cassena thicket.

There he sat patiently for an hour, smoking his corn-cob pipe and building air castles. He saw the king and his mate return, watched the latter alight on a pine limb near by, while the former, carrying a big catfish carcass in his claws, flew to the nest; and he marked with care the exact spot on the nest on which the eagle alit. Then, when the king and his consort had departed again, perhaps in search of more food to deposit in the nest, which they often used as a storehouse, Jen rose and went his way, well pleased with the results of his scouting. He did not know that there was another King of Odishash who reigned on this jungle-covered barrier isle—a mighty monarch, clad in glittering mail, who ruled with irresistible power and merciless tyranny; and Jen laid his plans for the next day's operations unaware that cold, lidless, unwinking eyes had watched him as he dreamed in his cassena ambush and that for an hour he had sat within twenty feet of death.

By nine o'clock the next morning Jen was back at the edge of the little opening in the jungle beneath the eagles' pine. From the shelter of the thicket he saw the two big birds perching side by

side on a limb near the nest, and he waited in concealment until in about thirty minutes they circled upward and headed out to sea. Then he went energetically to work.

To Jen the climb up the pine trunk was a small matter. It was his boast—not altogether a vain one—that he could follow wherever a ring-tailed coon might lead. With a length of stout rope passed around his waist and around the trunk of the tree, he went up slowly but steadily, stopping twice to rest, and in less than ten minutes he gained the first of the pine's few limbs. Directly below the great bulging nest there was some little delay; but presently, with the help of his rope, his long steel-corded arms drew his lean light body up on one of the large limbs forming the crotch in which the king's castle was built. Standing on this limb, to which his bare feet stuck like the clinging feet of a tree frog or a lizard, he peered eagerly over the rim of the nest.

The king's castle, his home for more than twenty-five years, was built mainly of sticks, some of them nearly as stout as Jen's wrist, bark, sods and gray Spanish moss. Each season the king and his mate had repaired it and added to it until now it was nearly six feet in height, and the marshman, standing tiptoe on the limb, could barely see its flat interior, lined with moss, sedge, pine straw, leaves and

grass. Testing the structure of the nest, Jen found that the sticks forming its outer walls were so firmly interlaced that, by putting most of his weight on a convenient branch just within reach of his hand, he could make his way to the summit. This he proceeded to do; then, kneeling on the top of the nest, amid the fragments of fish and other refuse that he found there, he began his search, thrusting his hand through and under the moss and grass.

Almost at once he uttered an exclamation of delight. Six inches under the moss his hand had closed upon something round and hard, a little larger than a hen's egg. A matter-of-fact man who had never heard of the Eagle Stone which had power to open money vaults and treasure chests, might have supposed that this hard round thing deep under the loose bedding of the nest was a water-worn bit of limestone, a spherical piece of bone or a nodule of black marsh mud compressed in the course of time to the hardness of rock and brought up to the nest in the sods which formed part of the structure. But Jen, all aquiver with exultant joy, knew that he had found the precious object of his quest.

He knelt for a moment, shaking like a man with fever, his hand still under the moss. Then he withdrew it empty, fished a big blue cotton handkerchief out of his pocket and worked it under the mossy

mattress of the nest. He would run no risk of letting even one ray of light touch the Eagle Stone and thus weaken or destroy its magic. When he again withdrew his hand the dark-blue handkerchief was wrapped around it and around the object which it enclosed; and as quickly as possible he thrust the treasure, still wrapped in the handkerchief, into his trousers pocket.

Jen was a practical soul. Credulous and superstitious he was, like most of the dusky marshmen and woodsmen of the Low Country, a believer in "hants" and incantations and spells and in many queer legends and myths about the abundant wild folk of the Low Country woods and marshes. But he knew that there were some who scoffed at the story of the Eagle Stone, and he had started on this quest with a double object in view, so that if he found no talisman in the eagles' nest he still might profit from his undertaking. His own doubts, if he had any, as to the virtue of the talisman had now vanished pretty completely, but this did not prevent him from carrying out also the other part of his design.

First he climbed some distance down the pine and out upon a limb. With a sharp hatchet which he carried in his belt he cut a section of this limb, about four feet in length and weighing perhaps ten pounds, and lashed it to the pine trunk below the

nest, using a very light cord just strong enough to hold it in place. Then he made his way back into the nest and with the sure instinct and uncanny skill which had so often aroused the envy of his fellows he set about his delicate task there. In fifteen minutes he had completed it, and after a final careful inspection to satisfy himself that the nest showed no evidences of his visit, he began his descent.

Just as he reached the ground he saw a tiny speck against the blue sky—a speck which might be only a soaring turkey vulture or ibis, but, on the other hand, might be the king or his mate. Stooping low, his hand clutching the treasure in his pocket, he hastened to his hiding place near the edge of the cassena thicket.

He was just in time. Five minutes later the king alit on the rim of the nest. The marshman's luck was still with him. It was the great bird himself and not his mate, who was noticeably smaller than her lord, though in nearly all cases the female eagle is the larger. And Jen's skill, his boasted woodcraft, held good also. His sharp eye and quick brain had made no mistake. He had studied the interior of the king's castle with an almost preternatural understanding of what it revealed as to the eagle's accustomed movements after alighting. Coming to rest upon the same smooth rounded stick

at the nest's rim upon which Jen had seen him alight the day before, the king paused there a few moments, turning his snowy head this way and that, glancing keenly about him. Then with a rather awkward hop he passed to the flat, moss-lined and grass-littered interior of the nest within the circle of sticks.

Instantly he leaped upward, his great wings beating desperately, madly, churning the air. Ten feet or so he rose, with the small rusty steel trap with which Jen caught minks gripping two toes of his left foot, crushing them together. A long slender cord of strong fishing line, doubled and twisted, led downward from the trap over the rim of the nest to the section of pine limb lashed to the tree trunk. As the cord tightened, the eagle, his ascent arrested, screamed with rage and swung outward. For a moment he remained stationary in the air, held by the cord, his powerful wings beating more furiously than ever. Suddenly something gave way beneath him. For a quarter of a minute perhaps he held a level course over the roof of the jungle. Then, his wings laboring mightily, he began to slant downward.

Far beneath him, at the end of the cord, dangled the heavy pine clog, which, just as Jen had intended, had pulled loose from the tree trunk as soon as the trapped eagle jerked the cord strongly. Lower and

lower sank the king, fighting to the last. Then the clog caught in the billowy green top of the cassena thicket and the eagle pitched earthward. Grinning with quiet satisfaction, Jen, who had rushed out into the clearing to mark the spot where the great bird fell, set out to find him, picking up a light stick on his way to help him make a passage through the dense growth.

A hundred yards from the eagles' pine, in an open sunny spot just beyond the outer edge of the cassena thicket, a diamond rattlesnake lay at full length in the short grass. Nearly seven feet long from the point of his plated arrow-shaped head to the end of his fifteen-ringed rattle and fully eleven inches in girth, his greenish-yellow body marked with dark-brown rhomboidal blotches bordered with gold, the huge serpent was a superb specimen of his terrible race, at once gorgeously beautiful and indescribably hideous. Even more arrogantly than the king of the air ruled the spaces above the island jungle the giant rattler ruled the jungle itself. A monarch of uncertain temper, his mood depending mainly upon the state of his stomach, he had watched Jen with sluggish well-fed tolerance the day before as the marshman sat in his cassena ambush near the eagles' pine. Today, however, he was

hungry and his mood had changed. His fury knew no bounds when suddenly, with a swish and surge of mighty wings, a great white-headed bird swooped down from the air and landed in the grass directly in front of him and not more than two feet from his nose.

With almost incredible swiftness the big rattler threw his long thick body into coil, his kettledrum ringing its insistent challenge, his dreadful spear-shaped head drawn well back within the circle of his dilating mailed body and pointed directly at the presumptuous intruder who had dared to invade his privacy.

Promptly the king, somewhat shaken but uninjured by his fall, faced about to confront the snake. The trap on his foot hampered him sadly, but the long cord connecting the trap with the pine clog had fallen slack and he had some freedom of movement. He knew nothing about rattlesnakes, and, although their kingdoms lay so close together, he had never seen this serpent monarch before; but somehow he was aware that there was deadly peril in the huge reptile coiled in front of him, glaring at him with small, glittering, stony eyes, as hard and cold as jewels. Captive though he was in the grip of the trap, the king's bold spirit rose to meet the danger, and from his own deep-set, piercing, yellow eyes he sent back glare for glare.

A half minute the two kings—the king of the air and the king of the island jungle—faced each other thus. Then the rattler, jaws gaping hugely so that the two white curved hollow fangs projected straight forward, lunged at the eagle's breast. The eagle—thanks, no doubt, to the marvelous quickness of his vision—seemed to sense the blow even before it was launched. He tried to jump backward, but the trap checked him, and, thrown sideways by the effort, he instantly spread his wings to regain his balance. Thus, in the nick of time, one broad pinion interposed between his body and the snake and caught the rattler's blow as a gladiator's shield might catch a sword thrust. A pale yellowish fluid dripped down over the stiff, black-brown primary feathers of the outspread wing; and just as the king regained his footing and faced his foe again the rattler struck his second blow.

Again the eagle's amazing eyesight played its part, apparently flashing to his brain a warning that the envenomed spearhead was about to be launched. He was a little farther from the snake now, his maneuver during the first attack having lifted and moved the trap some six inches. Though still within the rattler's reach, he was only just within it; and when, in instant response to the warning given by his eyes, he tried to jump backward as before and was again checked by the trap and thrown off his

balance, the swift movement carried him just beyond the danger line.

Again the long, thin, needlelike fangs, thrusting forward out of the great serpent's hugely gaping jaws, clashed against the heavily shafted feathers of the eagle's outstretched wing as he strove with a desperate flapping of his pinions to regain his footing; and again the dark-brown feathers were sprinkled, but not so plentifully as before, with pale-yellow fluid. Once more the king had won, and he seemed to know it. Proudly erect he stood, his white head held high, his shining eyes, deep under their frowning brows, glaring defiance.

Jen Murray the marshman, thrusting his way with the aid of his stick through the outermost fringe of the cassena thicket, realized anew that he had never before seen an eagle as splendid as this one. As Jen stepped out into the open his eyes were fixed upon the king, appraising with the enjoyment of a connoisseur the great bird's beautifully molded form, clear-cut as marble, the gleaming whiteness of his head, neck and tail contrasting vividly with the rich dark brown of his big broad-shouldered body and his wings. For the moment, the marshman forgot everything else, even the Eagle Stone itself, in wonder at the size and the dauntless bearing of the feathered monarch standing there before him,

held helpless by the trap, yet looking every inch a conqueror.

But into Jen's mind there crept no pang of compassion, no sense of sympathy for the great valiant bird, robbed of his freedom and brought down to earth by the cunning strategy of the marshman's brain. His small eyes shone with the joy of possession as he strode swiftly forward through the grass, intent only upon making sure of his prize. He did not know how firm a grip the trap, which was rather an old one, had upon the eagle's foot, and he would not feel certain of his triumph until he had his prisoner in his hands. He intended to grapple with the eagle by throwing his coat over the bird's head, thus saving himself from being torn by the strong hooked beak or the long claws; but first he walked close up to the king to have a look at the trap and satisfy himself that its hold was good.

The rattlesnake, coiled close beside a tussock of tall stiff olive-green grass with the color of which the hues of his body blended perfectly, had been so absorbed in his duel with the eagle that he failed to note the approach of another enemy until Jen was almost upon him. Then swiftly his terrible head, poised above his massive coils, swung to face the new foe. To Jen's deaf ears the huge serpent's rattle, incessantly ringing its challenge, carried no

warning, and the marshman, his attention focused upon the eagle, saw the great reptile, half-hidden by the grass at his feet, at the very moment when the glittering, lustrous coils sprang open as though released by a trigger and the hideous head with its yawning jaws flashed forward and upward.

With a scream Jen leaped, slashing wildly at the snake with the stick held in his left hand. Even in that mad moment he knew that he was too late. He had felt the impact of the snake's head on his thigh, and a swift overpowering surge of terror turned the green jungle black around him. As he staggered, fainting, barely able to see, his legs suddenly weak, his foot caught in the light, strong cord leading from the eagle's trap to the pine clog fifteen yards away in the thicket. Pitching forward on his face, he lay motionless in the grass six feet behind the king.

At an equal distance in front of the eagle the great rattler squirmed and writhed, twisting and turning with convulsive spasmodic jerks of his burly, muscular body. Plainly he was in trouble. Jen's slender stick, whipping through the air, had struck the side of the snake's head as it drew swiftly back after delivering its thrust, and the big reptile, his lower jaw knocked askew, was dazed by the blow.

Possibly his spine had been injured. He seemed unable to lift his head and neck more than an inch

or two from the ground, and apparently he could not bend his body back into the close symmetrical coil which was his fighting attitude. That coil was a living spring, supplying the motive power for the long swift thrusts of his head, and only when coiled could he strike with his accustomed strength, quickness and accuracy.

Yet, crippled though he was, he was still formidable, and the pain which racked him added to his fury. Whether by chance or by design, his frenzied writhings and lashings to and fro were bringing him nearer and nearer to the eagle. Soon he was within half his length of the king, and the javelinlike head, its jaws flaring crookedly, shot forward close to the ground in the direction of his foe. The blow fell short, but in another moment the seemingly aimless and uncontrolled contortions of the snake landed him almost at the king's feet, and savagely the broad flat head lunged again.

The king could retreat no farther. When Jen, fainting with terror, had stumbled across the trap line and fallen, his foot had pulled the line taut, and the trapped eagle was anchored where he stood. The king knew this, for he had tried vainly to move. His muscles tightened and his eyes glowed a fiercer yellow as the writhing monster drew nearer and nearer. Just as the rattlesnake's poisoned javelin shot forward two inches above the ground in that

final thrust, the eagle's wings opened, beating powerfully, and with his free foot he struck forward and downward, his talons spread to the utmost. Next moment his claws closed upon the rattler's head.

The king was fast to his foe, clamped to him with a grip that could not be shaken. Two long claws had pierced the snake's wide head from above, another had sunk deep into his throat from below, and the muscles operating those claws were strong enough to drive them through gristle and bone. The huge serpent thrashed and writhed like a creature in convulsions, and the eagle, one foot in the trap, the other imbedded in his enemy, was all but torn in two. Pulled this way and that as the contortions of the stricken snake dragged eagle and trap here and there over the ground, the king could not keep himself upright no matter how desperately his pinions beat the air. His wing beats were growing weaker when another convulsive twist of the giant snake's powerful body almost wrenched the big bird asunder and a sharp, intolerable pain shot through him.

That pain was the signal of his victory. A corner of the trap had been jammed under a grass tussock, and the toes of the eagle's left foot had been jerked free by that last and mightiest plunge of the rattler, the trap's steel jaws raking them to the bone.

Somehow the king knew that his chance had come.

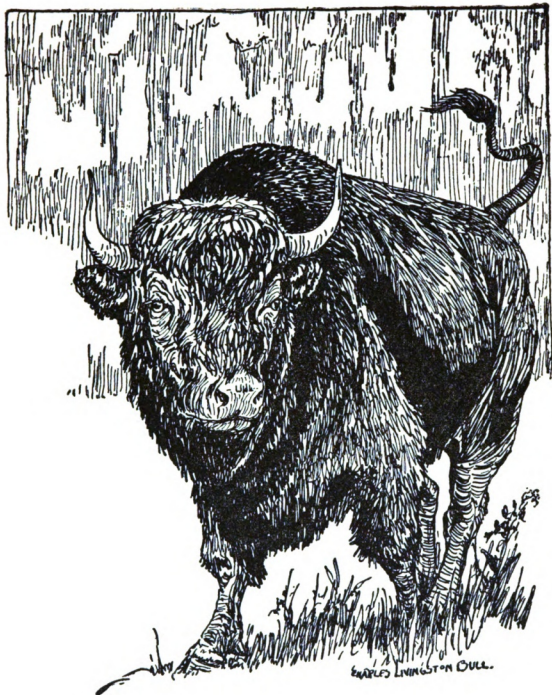
Putting all his strength into the effort, he drew the talons of his other foot out of the rattler's head. Next moment his wide pinions, strongly beating, were bearing him upward into the air.

Jen Murray, the marshman, with all his faith in his own woodcraft, was never quite sure that he had figured out correctly precisely what happened while he lay insensible. The first thing that he saw when he opened his eyes and rolled over on his back was an eagle high in the air, spiraling upward into the blue, his snowy head gleaming like silver in the sun. Instantly, then, came recollection and, with it, another wave of the overpowering terror which had dropped him in a dead faint in the grass. Not until a hurried examination revealed the fact that the rattler's fangs had imbedded themselves harmlessly in the thick, bulky folds of the big handkerchief wrapped about the rounded stone in his pocket did Jen recover command of his faculties.

Then, assured that he was not going to die, he looked about him and saw the great snake ten feet from him in the grass, writhing feebly, evidently near death. He saw the holes and gashes in the rattler's bloody head, he saw in the grass and on the ground the evidences of a struggle, he saw the empty trap. But he was still feeling somewhat sick

and weak and ne did not stay to study to the last detail the mystery of the king's escape and of the dying serpent.

The priceless Eagle Stone, which would bring him riches incalculable, was safe in his pocket, and already it had proved its virtue by saving his life. He smashed the rattler's head with an oak stick, then slung the huge carcass over the stick and started homeward. It would yield much oil, excellent for rheumatism, and the skin, nicely tanned and stretched, could be sold for half a dollar to some young blood of the Odistash plantations who would make a dashing scarf out of it for his lady.



Black Bull of Ahowhe

BLACK BULL OF AHOWHE

DURING the night fierce unearthly voices had screamed or roared in the darkness. With the coming of morning, other and more numerous voices were added to those of the hunting beasts.

From the sunlit tops of tall cypresses near at hand a hundred wild turkey cocks sent out a rolling incessant clamor of defiant and amorous calls. Another great flock took up the challenge, another flock, and another, until the whole swamp for miles around rang and echoed with the noise. Fifty feet above the cypress summits sailed an army of giant white cranes, raining down repeated volleys of clear, resonant, whooping cries. Wilder by far, the deep reverberant dragon music of huge alligators shook the air, while, like a sharper echo of these tremendous love bellowings, the hunting cry of a wolf pack trailing a deer through high pine woods a mile away rose and fell in sinister cadence as the fitful breeze freshened and lulled. Twice the hoarse coughing roar of a bear rolled from the depths of the cypress fastness; once from a greater distance came the long-

drawn melancholy wail of a puma; again and again three wildcats hunting together screeched savagely to startle and confuse their prey.

Such was the chorus which greeted Black Bull at the hour of his birth on an April morning when the Low Country was young and the fear of the white man had not yet settled over the wilderness and stilled the wilderness voices. The spring had been damp and cold. This was the first warm clear dawn in many weeks, and for that reason the outcry of the preying beasts and the great birds which frequented the cypress swamp swelled louder and longer than usual. The wild black cow, standing guard over her first-born in the recesses of a vast canebrake, shook her horns and glanced apprehensively to right and left. Many times she had listened to this fearful concert of the primeval forest—listened unmoved and indifferent, because she was a child of the forest herself and knew how to meet its dangers. But on this morning, when she had just become a mother, she was afraid.

Her calf, glossy black from nose to tail tip, lay on a dry bed of leaves in the midst of canes which towered thirty feet above him. For forty miles or more the canebrake stretched between the great swamp and the dry upland woods, forming an evergreen belt a half mile in width, the height and girth of the canes attesting the richness of the dark

moist soil from which they sprang. So close together stood the smooth green stems that no creature larger than a fox could make its way between them; but through every part of the brake wound well-trodden paths made by the buffalo and the deer and now used also by the wild black cattle which abounded in certain regions of the swamp country. It was at the intersection of two of these paths that the black calf was lying.

His mother could scarcely have chosen a more perilous spot for the bringing forth of her young. From any one of four directions danger might come, and she could not guard all four approaches at once. The wild cow seemed fully aware of the disadvantages of the situation. She stood squarely over the calf, facing that one of the paths which led straight into the depths of the brake; and, as though already warned of the approach of some formidable foeman along this shadowy tunnel, she presently took six steps forward, lowered her head and flourished her long sharp-pointed horns in a gesture of angry defiance.

Yet it was from the opposite direction that the first intruder came. The light breeze blew from the heart of the canebrake. It had brought news of danger in that quarter and had concentrated her attention there. The moccasined feet of the tall young Indian hunter approaching from the cane-

brake's edge fell soft as velvet on the damp leafy carpet of the trail behind the black cow. Noiseless as a stalking lynx, the lithe brown form, naked above the waist, stole swiftly nearer. In the deceptive twilight of the cane thicket the black calf, motionless on its bed of fallen leaves, was all but invisible at a little distance. Not until he had come within fifteen feet of it did Keenta the Beaver see the baby bull.

He halted, undecided. Catching her unawares and having her at a disadvantage in the narrow path, he had meant to attack the wild cow; but, discovering that she was the mother of a newly born calf, he realized that his spear could not save him when she charged, and he had dropped his long bow in the trail behind him so that he could use both hands in driving the spear home. Yet Keenta, bold-est of young hunters, disliked to draw back from an adventure; and when he had set out from the village, well before daylight, Ahowhe the Long-Haired had bade him remember that she was weary of venison.

A young bear's paws would suit her taste well, she had said, or, better yet, a haunch of beef from the wild black cattle which had spread inland from the white men's settlements near the coast and now ranged in hundreds through the swamps. Keenta had rejoiced when, as he stole along the trail through

the canes, he saw the black cow in the path ahead of him, up the wind from him and with her head turned the other way. With good luck he could come within arm's length of her and he knew a thrust which would kill her before she could travel twenty bow shots. But seeing the calf, Keenta knew that the wild cow would not run when the thrust had been delivered. She would wheel and charge like lightning; and Keenta the Beaver was a bold hunter, but no fool.

A moment the young Indian stood motionless, considering; then, with dramatic suddenness, fate solved his problem for him. Already his eyes had been searching the path beyond the cow, for he had noted the tossing of her head, the nervous lashing of her tail, and he knew that along that dim winding tunnel through the canes some great beast must be coming. Wolves, bears and pumas walked the canebrake paths, and from the cow's actions Keenta judged that she had scented one of these three; but, alert and expectant though he was, the swiftness of the tragedy surprised him.

For a fraction of a second he glimpsed a vague shape at the bend of the trail beyond the cow—a shadowy, indeterminate form which seemed to fill the path and in the midst of which two large eyes gleamed cold and bright like jewels. Then, instantaneously, the puma was blotted from his view by

the black bulk of the cow impetuously charging her foeman.

Keenta the Beaver stood and watched, his nerves a-tingle. The puma was the Cat of God, the greatest hunter of all the wild hunters; but surely this puma, confronted in that narrow trail by those long sharp horns rushing down upon him, must turn and run or perish. Halfway to the bend in the trail the black cow stumbled slightly, her forefoot bogged in a deep hole in the treacherous floor of the pathway; and in that same instant Keenta saw the tawny master of the wilderness hurl his long sinewy bulk upon his victim. Just how the thing was done even the quick vision of the red warrior could not distinguish. But a moment later the cow lay motionless in the path, her neck broken, while upon her body stood the great Cat of God, his long tail waving slowly to and fro, his round, cold, passionless eyes fixed steadfastly upon the young Indian.

For perhaps a minute Keenta the Beaver returned that glassy stare, standing erect in his tracks, his spear poised in his right hand. The Cat of God was no coward in those days. The white man's weapons had not then broken his spirit. He was no fool, like the buffalo bull, to rush heedless to destruction. But he knew his own might and was master of the wild creatures of the primeval forest; and the copper-colored men of the forest respected him and

did him honor, because he was the greatest of all hunters and killed only to satisfy his need. Between them and him a sort of truce existed; yet it was a truce which was sometimes broken in time of stress when the red man tried to take the puma's kill. So for a while Keenta the Beaver and the black cow's tawny slayer watched each other warily in the twilight of the overarching canes, neither knowing what the other might do.

Presently Keenta, his gaze never straying from those cold inscrutable eyes, began to speak. First and at great length he paid the puma many compliments, hailing him as the forest's lord, extolling his lithe beauty, praising his skill as a hunter, lauding the niceness and cleanliness of his feeding habits. Then, with glowing eloquence, he told of the loveliness of Ahowhe the Long-Haired and of her capriciousness and of how she had wearied of deer's meat. In conclusion, he proposed a bargain. The Cat of God should keep his kill, he should feast on the cow that he had stricken down; and Keenta the Beaver, young warrior of the Yemassees, would take as his share the little black bull calf and carry it alive to Ahowhe.

He paused, searching the unwavering yellow eyes for a sign. Then, thrusting his spear into the ground, he walked slowly forward. The great yellow-brown form looming above the body of the

cow stiffened and crouched, the cold eyes narrowed and gleamed. But Keenta walked on, smiling a little in satisfaction with his own valor. Calmly he knelt beside the calf. He could no longer see the puma, because his back was turned. He knew that at one bound the huge cat could strike him lifeless. Yet he stopped to stroke the calf and to speak to it gently.

“Little black bull,” he said, “Ahowhe, who sent me to hunt, has saved you, for the great beast yonder would have killed you had I not come. With Ahowhe you will be safe, for she loves all young things. And some day you will be known as Yanasa, the Very Great Bull, the Master of the Herds.”

Slowly he lifted the calf and slung it across his broad bare shoulders. Turning, he faced the puma and made with his right hand the stately gesture of farewell. Then he strode off along the canebrake trail.

Burliegh, the English hunter, coming down to Charles Town with a small mounted caravan from the trading posts of the Muskogee country, camped for the night near the head of the great cypress swamp. Again it was spring, the season of late jasmine and Indian rose. At first dawn Burliegh,

awakened by the bellowing of great alligators and the incessant tumult of tall white egrets roosting in thousands in a black gum bay near by, mounted his wiry Chickasaw pony and rode out in advance of his comrades to get meat, his larder being empty. In a land of miraculous plenty, where the poorest man—provided he could shoot—might dine on the choicest of meats, Burliegh craved plain and common food. Surfeited with venison and bears' paws, with wood duck and wild turkey, he yearned for a breakfast of roasted rabbit.

Leaving camp, he rode along the outer edge of the canebrake through wild pea vines and dark green rushes as high as his horse's back. Away to his right stretched a long narrow prairie, two miles long and half a mile wide, a natural meadow reaching deep into the virgin forest, which walled it in on either side. Down this green vista Burliegh's gaze roved casually, viewing familiar things—deer grazing in herds of thirty or forty, a drove of fifty wild black cattle, a flock of ten thousand passenger pigeons flying like the wind, a swarm of vultures crowding about a carcass, a lordly bull elk striding through a group of whitetails toward the forest's rim. On the prairie the pea-vine growth was luxuriant, but not so tall, and in the moister places it was supplanted by short vivid green grass. One such spot, an acre or more in extent, gleamed

white as snow—a solid mass of big birds of various sizes, some of them almost as tall as a man; whooping cranes, wood ibises, white ibises and egrets of two kinds.

Where the deer paths entered the canebrake the tall rushes through which the hunter rode fell away. In one of these openings at the entrance of a path his horse stopped suddenly with a snort. A small black bear which had just emerged from the brake wheeled with ludicrous haste and vanished amid the canes. At the next opening, warned by an ominous sound, Burliegh scanned the ground ahead of him, tickled his horse's flanks with his heels and spoke two words. The pony, well trained and unafraid, bounded forward, then jumped. His small hoofs passed high over the obstacle—a six-foot diamond rattlesnake, coiled at the threshold of the canebrake trail.

Presently the hunter found a spot suited to his purpose—the entrance of a wide path striking straight into the cane thicket and crossing another path thirty feet from the thicket's edge. Burleigh halted, sitting motionless in his saddle, his rifle ready, his eyes fixed on the place where the two trails crossed. Two raccoons, a whitetail doe and five swamp rabbits came and went before he saw and shot a rabbit big enough to suit him.

Securing his game, he rode on, still skirting the

cane thicket, intending to stop and cook his breakfast in the woods just ahead where no rushes or wild pea vines cumbered the ground. On the prairie a group of ten deer, feeding in tall grass close to the forest edge, scattered suddenly in all directions. Burliegh craned his neck and saw a sinuous movement in the grass as though a huge snake were winding through it.

It was a young puma, he concluded, young and small; or else an old and very wily one, wily enough to crouch low as it made its way through the grass and thus keep its body hidden. After a minute, he swore softly. Proud of his woodcraft, he permitted himself no excuses. The serpentine weaving of the grass had ceased at the edge of a small circular opening around a sink hole, and across this opening had passed four black wolves of the small Low Country breed, one trotting behind the other.

Burliegh stared moodily at the spot where they had reëntered the grass, frowning over his mistake as though some misfortune had befallen him. Suddenly his expression changed. Rising in his stirrups and pushing back his wide-brimmed hat, he gazed for a long minute at a dark object far down the prairie, a bow shot from the edge of the woods.

A troop of whitetails intercepted his view and he rode on a dozen yards, then halted to examine the

distant object again. Presently he was satisfied. No bull of the wild black cattle, which were generally lean and undersized, could bulk so large. It was a buffalo, he was sure; yet for years buffalo had been practically unknown in the Low Country—where, indeed, they had never been abundant, preferring the uplands where the prairie-meadows were more extensive. Burliegh marked the spot where the bull was feeding, then rode on at a quicker pace to the edge of the woods.

There he decided that breakfast could wait. The lone bull out on the prairie interested him and something in its shape puzzled him. A short ride just within the forest margin would afford him a better view. He broke a sapling to show his comrades the direction he had taken. Then he set off at a brisk canter at right angles to his former course.

No undergrowth hampered his pony's progress through the splendid parklike forest of gigantic white oak and red oak, hickory, magnolia and beech, alive with gray squirrels and fox squirrels, some of the latter coal-black save for white noses and ears. Many times deer lying just within the woods-edge bounded away before him, most of them running out into the open. A large flock of brilliant green and yellow parrakeets, screaming like mad, passed low over his head. Alighting on the ground a little distance to the left, they covered a space fifty

feet square with a gorgeous carpet of rich green and vivid gold. Alarmed at his approach, they took wing again and flew with shrill screechings out of the woods and across the prairie.

Burleigh paid no attention to them, but marveled a little at the wild turkeys. The place was evidently a courting ground for the big flocks which roosted in the cypress swamp beyond the belt of canes; and on every side, as he rode amid the far-spaced trees, he saw great bronze gobblers strutting and pacing before coquettish hens. Once or twice he fingered his weapon nervously as some exceptionally magnificent gobbler tempted him; but remembering the object of his quest, he rode on.

Black Bull, lazily cropping the succulent prairie grasses a bow shot from the forest's edge, raised his head often to look and listen. Six springs had passed since, as a newly born calf, he had been borne out of the canebrake, ten miles farther down, on the strong young shoulders of Keenta the Beaver, who had carried him to Ahowhe the Long-Haired and laid him at the girl's feet. Thus he had become Ahowhe's pet and had so continued through his babyhood. Later he was known as Black Bull of Ahowhe; and later still, when he had attained his full astonishing bulk, there were some—Keenta among them—who called him Yanasa, the Very Great Bull, though in truth that name belonged

rightfully to the buffalo. Yet there was warrant for the title, for very soon it became evident that the black calf's sire had been a bison—some lone wanderer from the herds of the upper country who in his loneliness had found a mate among the wild black cattle of the Low Country swamps.

Black Bull showed plainly his buffalo blood. His great size, his splendid frontlet and beard, his high-humped shoulders, the shaggy coat of hair on neck and hump—all these came from his sire. But he was jet-black instead of brown; his tail was long; his horns, of much greater length and curving forward, were far more serviceable weapons than a buffalo's horns. From his mother's race he had inherited also something even more valuable than those long forward-pointing pikes—a brain alert instead of sluggish. The wild black cattle of the swamps, originating as strays from the vast herds of the rich white planters near the coast, had deteriorated in size but increased enormously in numbers despite the preying beasts with which the great swamps teemed. With each generation they had grown sharper of wit, keener of scent and of hearing, until in these respects they rivaled even the deer. In bulk and in form, in massive head and shaggy coat, Black Bull was his father's son. But the brain in that head was not the brain of a buffalo.

All this Keenta had pointed out to Ahowhe long

before Black Bull was full grown and while he still grazed with tame cattle about the outskirts of the Indian village. Ahowhe, lover of all young things, had loved the little black calf which she had reared from infancy, providing it with a foster mother and caring for it herself; but when it had become a yearling bull her affection for it had cooled.

Not only was the bull of great stature for its age but it was also of a proud and dangerous temper. Ahowhe, comely as ever, but still childless, transferred her affections to other young things—fawns which Keenta brought her from the forest, a baby bear, two young ring-tailed raccoons; and Black Bull, grown more and more arrogant as his bulk increased, would have been dealt with as a menace to the village had not Keenta's influence protected him until the time came, as Keenta knew it would, when Black Bull bade the village farewell.

Even then, so far as was possible, Keenta continued to watch over him. All the tribesmen knew why. Kanakaw the conjurer had read in the writhing entrails of a slaughtered kid that Keenta's fate was bound up with the fate of the black bull calf which he had taken from under the eyes of the great Cat of God; that a day would come when Keenta, in peril of death, must perish unless Black Bull chose to save him; that not until then would Ahowhe bear him the son that he desired.

It was a great prophecy and all the village approved it. Black Bull, as wild and wary now as the deer, ranged far and wide. Keenta could not follow him on all his journeyings, and for weeks at a time never saw him. Yet the young warrior knew the wild bull's favorite ranges, trailed him when opportunity offered, and viewed him from the thickets to make sure that no bullet had harmed him, that no snake had struck him and that his health was good.

A white hunter's bullet, a rattlesnake's venom, disease—these were the dangers which Keenta feared for Black Bull. The red hunters, aware of the prophecy, would not shoot him. His strength and his cunning would keep him safe from puma and bear and wolf pack, and from the huge alligators lurking in ambush in the lagoons and rivers where the deer and the wild black cattle drank. Most of all, Keenta feared the white hunters. These seldom came into Black Bull's range, because the region on that side of the great cypress swamp was recognized as an Indian hunting ground. But sometimes small parties of them passed through, and their long, heavy rifles shot straight and far.

Black Bull, cropping the grasses languidly and often lifting his massive shaggy head to look about

him, saw a herd of ten deer, far away up the prairie, suddenly scatter in all directions. He shook his head and snorted. He knew what that lively commotion of the whitetails meant. Some hunting beast—puma or bear or wolf—had made a foray from the forest's edge. Black Bull had no dread of any of these, but the thought of them angered him. Again he snorted and flourished his horns, then turned to look at his herd of fifteen black cows lying in the wild pea vines a hundred yards behind him.

A half mile away grazed a much larger herd, including many bulls; but Black Bull was not interested in these. Overawing all rivals, he had taken his pick of the cows and he concerned himself only with these favorites. A glance showed him that they were well out on the prairie, safe from any marauder that might be lurking in the cover of the woods. For himself, he feared nothing. He resumed his feeding, moving closer and closer to the forest's edge.

Presently he saw a buck run at full speed out of the woods near the spot where the other whitetails had taken fright. A few minutes later three wild turkeys flew out; then, nearer at hand, another deer emerged, and another still nearer. Soon a large flock of green-and-yellow parrakeets appeared, screeching shrilly. Plainly the marauder, what-

ever it was, was moving along the edge of the forest just within the outermost ranks of the trees, its progress marked by the deer, turkeys and parrakeets which its advance drove out into the open.

Black Bull made up his mind that the unseen enemy steadily drawing nearer within the forest margin was a puma. He tossed his huge head and blew loudly through his nose. Another deer dashed out of the woods not more than a hundred yards away. Lashing his tail, Black Bull marched majestically across the narrow strip of prairie and into the woods, his arrogant eyes searching the long sun-spotted vistas for the big tawny cat that had dared approach the feeding ground of his wives.

He saw no puma, nor any other foeman worthy of his attention. Only the smaller folk of the forest were visible—a troop of fox squirrels, a grizzled opossum nosing about amid the leaves, a flock of flickers searching the ground for insects, a scarlet-crested ivory-billed woodpecker, as big as a duck, scaling the bark from a rotting log.

Black Bull waited and watched, snorting at intervals and pawing the ground. There was no undergrowth to impede his view; but the sun rays, slanting down through the high roof of dense foliage, dazzled his vision somewhat and made a deceptive ever-changing mosaic of light and shadow on the forest carpet amid the huge upstanding

pillars of gray hickory and mottled sycamore. Black Bull, facing into the light, failed to distinguish the buckskin-clad form of the white hunter sitting still as a graven image on his sorrel pony, which, at a whispered word, had frozen into statue-like immobility.

Burliegh gazed at the great beast before him with narrowed eyes which plainly betrayed his astonishment. Having the sun behind him, he could distinguish every detail, and he knew at once that this huge coal-black creature was of a kind which he had never met with before and which no other hunter had ever described to him. Probably because of the bull's great size and because he had never heard of an instance of the sort, Burliegh did not suspect a cross of buffalo and wild black cattle. Here, he concluded naturally enough, was a new species of buffalo the like of which no other white man had ever seen—a buffalo black instead of brown, longer horned than the common sort, lower humped, yet longer limbed, a little less shaggy, yet royally clad in a thick sable coat which would bring a high price in the fur market.

Burliegh, confident of his own invisibility and thankful that he was to leeward of his quarry, studied the bull with the most minute care to impress indelibly upon his memory every detail of the animal's appearance in life. Years might pass

before he saw another of its kind. He wanted to learn all he could about this one before he shot it.

Black Bull, unconscious of the scrutiny, impatiently awaiting the puma whose coming he still expected, stood in an open sunny spot midway between two giant white oaks whose boughs interlaced forty feet above him. For a space of minutes he stood thus, tossing his head and stamping, a superb picture of massively proportioned strength and defiant fearlessness. Then, as no enemy answered his challenge, he turned broadside to the hunter and walked slowly toward the larger white oak.

Burliegh moved not a muscle. His practiced eye told him that the bull was going to lie down; and he would probably lie with his back to the sun, thus facing away from the hunter and making possible a closer approach.

It was as Burliegh expected, but even better. The great bull moved deliberately across the glade, chose a shady place close to the oak, lowered his massive body to the ground with a sinuous writhing of bulging muscles under the sleek hide of his hind quarters. Not only was his head turned away from the hunter but the latter knew that the vital spot behind the bull's shoulder was widely exposed for a fatal shot.

Burliegh touched the Chickasaw pony's flank

with his heel, tightened and twitched the bridle. The pony, ears pricked, moved forward very slowly, his small hoofs delicately pressing the ground. Burliegh dropped the bridle rein, raised his long rifle halfway to his shoulder. The pony would halt at a whisper. The hunter hoped to get yards closer to his prey but would shoot the instant the bull took alarm.

Ten feet to the left of the white oak a long reddish-brown snake, flowing silently across the leaves, stopped suddenly. Black Bull had flicked an ear to dislodge a fly and the snake's beady eyes had caught the motion. Four inches of the serpent's slender tail quivered rapidly, making a slight but distinctly audible rattling noise amid the dead leaves. Black Bull's shaggy head swung quickly toward the sound.

The Chickasaw pony stopped. Burliegh's rifle went to his shoulder. The long barrel wavered a fraction of a second, then steadied. Burliegh, peering along the rifle barrel, his finger caressing the trigger, saw a small white object flash downward. Twenty feet in front of him a white-feathered arrow stood quivering, its head buried in the ground.

The Chickasaw pony bounded forward as heels dug into his flanks, wheeled to the right as the

iron bit wrenched his mouth, steadied and stiffened as the bridle rein tightened. Already Burliegh, crouching low in his saddle behind the horse's neck, had the Indian covered.

The hunter's square-jawed, sun-tanned face glowed a dark red with excitement or anger; his gray eyes, narrow and sparkling, not only scanned the approaching red man but searched also the forest vistas behind him and the tree trunks to right and left.

The Indian, very tall and straight, naked save for a single deerskin garment about his waist, walked calmly forward, carrying his bow in his left hand. As he came on, he made with his right hand the gesture of peace. Burliegh, gazing grimly along his rifle barrel, made no sign or movement in reply. Fifteen paces from the rifle muzzle the red man halted.

"It is Keenta the Beaver who speaks," he said in the Yemassee tongue, "and Keenta is alone. The white hunter need not shoot. The arrow was not meant to do harm."

Burliegh's narrowed eyes searched the other's face. His frown darkened.

"Arrows are not sent as tokens of peace," he said in the same language. "Why did Keenta the Beaver drop an arrow at Burliegh's feet if he comes as a friend? Let him speak quickly and plainly, for

Burliegh's trigger finger itches and his eyes long to see daylight through Keenta's head."

The tall Indian's face remained utterly impassive.

"Keenta has heard of Burliegh of Wadboo," he said, his voice a little deeper than before, "and has learned that his words are strong. It pleases him now to threaten. Yet Keenta will do the white warrior's bidding. Let Burliegh listen.

"The, black bull which Burliegh saw on the prairie is the bull of Ahowhe, Keenta's woman. When Burliegh rose in his stirrups and viewed the bull, Keenta was watching from the canebrake. When Burliegh turned and rode through the forest, Keenta knew that he sought the black bull. Keenta followed, but was almost too late. Burliegh's rifle was at his shoulder. Keenta winged a slow arrow over Burliegh's head. He could as easily have sent that arrow into Burliegh's back. Now that he has spoken, he asks that Burliegh spare Ahowhe's bull."

The white hunter's frown had become a scowl. Burliegh was of that school which ruled the red men by overawing them. It was his boast among his fellows that he could read in any Indian's countenance the quality of his courage and that there was not one red man in ten whom he could not bend to his will. Largely, he was right; for from Santee to Edisto, from Kiawah to Unaka Kanoos,

Burliegh of Wadboo was respected and feared. He ripped out an oath.

“Keenta the Beaver is a liar,” he said in a voice as hard as steel. “He is a liar like all his race. And he is a serpent, hiding in canebrakes and spying on honest men. The black bull is a wild bull. Burliegh will shoot him from this spot while Keenta looks on.”

The Indian started to speak. Burliegh cut him short.

“Let Keenta listen,” he said. “With Burliegh are five Englishmen, great warriors and hunters, including Almayne himself. By now they have broken camp beside the cane thicket and are following Burliegh’s trail to this place. Keenta is a liar, but no fool.”

Contemptuously he turned his back upon the Indian and wheeled the pony around. Black Bull, hearing the sound of voices, had risen. The red hunters had never harmed him; the white hunters he had never chanced to meet; hence he had little or no fear of man. He stood tossing his head defiantly, more inclined to charge than to retreat.

Burliegh, a little surprised at the bull’s boldness, nevertheless recalled the proverbial stupidity of many buffalo. Evidently these black buffalo were sometimes as slow-witted as the brown. He leveled his weapon, aiming at the brain. It was a long

shot, but so much the better. The Indian would be the more impressed.

The pony moved a fraction of an inch. Burliegh growled a reprimand and readjusted his aim. Keenta must not see him miss. He took plenty of time, drawing a fine and careful bead.

Burliegh, his shoulder turned to the Indian, saw nothing of the latter's movements. They were few, but marvelously swift. It was because Keenta excelled with the bow that he still hunted with the weapons of his fathers, though many of his tribesmen now used the white man's powder and shot.

Burliegh never knew whether Keenta threw the arrow with his hand or shot it from his bow. It must have been the latter, for the arrow pierced Burliegh's throat and made a deep dent in the hard wood of the rifle stock pressed against his chin.

The rifle dropped from the white hunter's hand. Turning slowly in his saddle, he stared dully at the Indian while blood jetted over his chest. Then, as the Chickasaw pony reared, he fell forward, clasping the horse's neck. The pony wheeled and galloped wildly along the back trail. Just before it vanished amid the tree trunks, Keenta saw Burliegh fall from the horse's back.

Keenta the Beaver turned and faced Black Bull. A strange light shone in his eyes, a light born of the thoughts and the hopes racing through his brain.

Somehow he knew suddenly that the time had come, the time for the testing of the prophecy, the hour which would determine his fate and, if he lived, perhaps bring promise of the son for whom he yearned. He had waited long for that hour and he was weary of waiting. In a sudden burst of light, knowledge had come to him that, if he had courage for the test, he could bring it to pass now.

Burliegh's comrades had already broken camp. This Keenta knew, for before he took up the hunter's trail he had seen them stirring. They, too, would follow Burliegh's tracks. Any moment might bring them, their coming hastened by the riderless horse. If they found Keenta, there would be drama in the forest—and Keenta knew the methods of Almayne. There would be no doubt as to Keenta's fate if he awaited the coming of Burliegh's friends and if Black Bull, on whom his fate depended, chose to let him die.

Keenta the Beaver, after the manner of his race, addressed to Black Bull, standing in the middle distance, a long and solemn speech. Then, as the Indian's quick eye caught a movement amid the trees near the spot where Burliegh had fallen, he crouched low, ran swiftly to a sycamore and stood behind its stout trunk. There he fitted another arrow to his bow.

Almayne, stooping beside Burliegh's body, wasted

little time there. The dying man had whispered half a dozen words: "Keenta the Beaver—alone—on foot." In an instant Almayne was on his horse again, giving his orders. The five horsemen spread out in a wide arc and moved on, Almayne himself in the center, following the tracks of Burleigh's pony. They rode forward silently but swiftly, their grim eyes searching the woods ahead, their rifles ready.

Suddenly, straight in front of Almayne, Keenta the Beaver stepped into view from behind a sycamore. His long bow was in his hand, an arrow fitted to the string; but his back was turned to the white hunter, as though he were unaware of the latter's approach.

Slowly he lifted the bow and drew the shaft to the head. Almayne, looking where the arrow pointed, saw for the first time a great black bull standing motionless a long bow shot away.

Carefully Keenta aimed, seemingly unaware of his peril, his back still turned to the white hunter; and swiftly Almayne slipped from his horse and ran forward, his moccasined feet making no sound.

The long bow twanged. Keenta bent forward, his eyes following the arrow's flight. The shaft sped true. It entered Black Bull's right shoulder a half second before Almayne leaped upon Keenta's back and bore him to the ground.

What happened then happened quickly. Keenta, writhing and heaving under Almayne's weight, heard the noise of hurrying hoofs as the other horse-men dashed up from both sides—heard and saw them fling themselves from their saddles and rush to their leader's aid. In that same instant, too, he heard another sound—Black Bull's thunderous bellow as red rage surged up in him after the first shock of pain. It was then that Keenta prayed to his gods, for there was one chance that he had overlooked—the chance that Black Bull would charge the horses instead of the struggling mass of men.

Keenta heard Almayne's hoarse cry, "Take him alive," felt the ground shake under a mightier tread than the tread of any horse, heard a white hunter's shout of amazement and alarm. Next moment Black Bull was upon them. Two men leaped clear in time. A third, who saved himself from death by clinging to Black Bull's horns as the irresistible sable avalanche rushed past, was tossed and broke his leg as he struck ground. A fourth lay on his back, groaning; and a fifth, Almayne himself, sprawled on his face utterly still, stunned by the impact of a flying hoof.

Keenta the Beaver, uninjured save for a long gash on his left arm, leaped to his feet and in an instant reached the nearest horse, rearing with terror but too well trained to bolt. Lithe as a

lynx, he bounded upon the horse's back. The light of triumph, the joy of fulfillment in his eyes, he gave the long war whoop of his tribe. Then, as two white hunters dashed for their horses and their guns, he dug his heels into the pony's flanks and raced for the canebrake and the swamp where ten thousand hunters could not track or find him.

The chuck-will's-widows, those strange night fowls which are like the whippoorwills but much larger, do not understand the nature of moonlight. Ordinarily they sing chiefly at dusk and toward dawn; but when the moon shines in spring they think that the whole night is one long dusk or one long dawn, and they sing unceasingly from sunset to sunrise.

All night, in a sparkleberry thicket near Ahowhe's round hut in the village, a chuck-will's-widow had been singing. It was only one of many, for these birds were plentiful about the Yemassee town. Ahowhe, wakeful because of the trouble that had befallen, had listened to the bird for hours, scarcely aware that she heard it, her mind being full of other things.

She knew that Sinnawa, the aged chief, must bow to Almayne's demand. At dusk the famous white warrior and four others, one of them groaning with

a broken rib, another nursing a smashed leg, had ridden into the village and brought word that Keenta the Beaver had killed the English hunter, Burliegh of Wadboo. Almayne's order was that Keenta the Beaver, the moment he returned, be sent a captive to Charles Town to pay the death penalty. Failing this, Almayne had said, the white troopers would come and burn the town.

Two hours before dawn, when clouds had obscured the moon, Ahowhe realized suddenly that the chuck-will's-widow sang with a new note. No one saw her when she went out into the darkness. No one saw her when she returned. No one saw her when she went out a second time.

Nor was Ahowhe ever seen in that village again; and Keenta the Beaver, Ahowhe's warrior, was seen there no more. Years afterwards, a young man of that village, returning from a mission to Moytoy of Tellequo, Emperor of the Nations, said that he had met Keenta and Ahowhe in a town of the Cherokees beyond the mountains, and that with them was a young boy, their son. His mother called the boy Black Bull of Ahowhe; but Keenta called him Yanasa, the Very Great Bull, the Master of the Herds.

The War of the Kings



THE WAR OF THE KINGS

ROE-ISHTO, the puma, whom the Cherokees called the Cat of God, was king of the mountain forests; but Storm-Rider, the great golden eagle of Younaguska peak, was lord of all the blue empire of the air. As is often the way with monarchs whose kingdoms lie close together, there was a certain rivalry between these two and some day there would be a reckoning. At least this was what Little Wolf, son of Sanuta the War Captain, said to himself, and to certain others, though whether he believed it or only pretended to believe it even Pakale the Blossom did not know.

Little Wolf, the young Cherokee brave, just now coming to manhood, was at once a warrior and a dreamer. Straight as a poplar, lithe as a panther, keen of eye and sharp of ear, he was already a better hunter than many tribesmen of riper years and longer experience. Yet, man of action though he was, expert with the bow and the spear, tireless on the hunting trail and versed in all the stratagems of the forest, his active brain found time and inclination to weave strange fancies about the wild-folk of the woods.

Often these fancies were not fancies at all but truths unperceived or unrealized by duller minds. Sometimes they were romantic imaginings in which he indulged for the fun of it, knowing all the while that they were imaginative but delighting in them, nevertheless, because they invested the wild creatures with a certain glamour and mystery. So, when Little Wolf told Kana the Conjurer that there was war between Koe-Ishto, the puma of Unaka Kanoos, and Storm-Rider, the golden eagle of Younaguska, Kana scarcely knew how seriously to take the young brave's words.

For a few moments the old magician turned the matter over in his mind as he squatted in the sun outside his hut near the middle of the Cherokee town. Very proud of his wisdom was Kana and very jealous of any man, especially any young man, who sought to tell him something he did not know. Yet he was cautious, too, and he could not afford to be caught in a mistake. To be caught by Little Wolf would be bitter indeed, for he disliked Little Wolf for various reasons, and most of all because of the young warrior's affection for Pakale the Blossom. At last, however, Kana made up his mind that this time he was on safe ground. He grunted scornfully.

"Behold," he said to the half-dozen young braves sitting in a half circle in front of him, "Little Wolf

THE WAR OF THE KINGS 197

brings us more of his strange wisdom. He tells us now that Koe-Ishto, the king of the woods, is at war with the king of the air, who has his home on Younaguska, the sacred mountain. Yet all men know that the paths of the puma and the eagle do not cross, that each rules his own kingdom and is High Chief there, and that no enmity lies between them. Behold, all ye, how Little Wolf's wisdom is deceit. If what he says is truth, let him prove it. Till then let him stand silent among his betters."

Little Wolf made no reply. Kana was a power in the tribe. Even the son of a War Captain could not dispute him too boldly. But the young warrior's dark eyes gleamed, the muscles of his bare red-brown arms rippled and tightened as he clenched his hands in anger.

He knew that Kana disliked him, but never before had the conjurer rebuked him publicly. He knew also that unless he could prove the truth of what he had said, his repute among the young men must rest under a cloud. Little Wolf realized that a hard task lay before him, one that would tax his woodcraft to the utmost.

For three days he went his way as usual. But he could not help noticing the changed attitude of the other young warriors and the averted glances of Pakale the Blossom. The Blossom had many suitors. She need not look at one who had been



held up to scorn before his fellows. Besides, she was tempted to teach Little Wolf a lesson which in her opinion he needed—a lesson on the unwisdom of stirring Kana's wrath.

On the afternoon of the third day Little Wolf sought out Pakale's brother, Striking Hawk, a young man of about his own age, who was his closest friend; and the next day at dawn the two went out together into the forest and were gone for many days. But before they went Little Wolf sent a message to Kana the Conjuror.

"Tell Kana," he said, "that on the thirtieth day Little Wolf will return to prove him a false prophet."

It was a daring challenge and the village rang with it. The warriors scowled and shook their heads. They feared that the young brave had attempted the impossible; and they knew that if he failed, he would not return.

Noiseless as a ghost, Koe-Ishto, the puma of Unaka Kanoos, stole along a dim winding tunnel threading the dense rhododendron thicket of Crystal Run. His padded feet fell soft as velvet on the damp carpet of dead leaves; his long, lithe, yellow-brown form moved amid the crooked rhododendron stems with the sinuousness of a snake; his round,

inscrutable eyes gleamed cold and hard like pallid, polished jewels. So soundless was his passage that even the marvelous ears of a horned owl, dozing through the daylight hours in the obscurity of the thicket, failed to record the great cat's coming.

Koe-Ishto, gliding around a bend of the path, saw the big bird perched on a bough some fifteen feet above the ground, his back turned; and for a half-second the puma paused, the tip of his tail twitching to and fro, his cold eyes measuring the distance. It would be a long, high leap, yet it might be accomplished. Koe-Ishto tightened his muscles for the mighty effort which would launch his sinewy body forward and upward; but at that moment from far away to the left a sound came to his ears.

It was the gobble of a wild turkey cock; and in a flash it sent Koe-Ishto's thoughts back to the business in hand—the mission which had brought him down from the heights of Unaka Kanoos to the rhododendron tangles bordering the bank of Crystal Run.

The big puma was a rather fastidious feeder. He would take all prey that came to him, all prey that he could capture with little effort; but in a land abounding with deer, wild turkeys and ruffed grouse, he seldom exerted himself in pursuit of smaller or less succulent game. The deer were his mainstay—his staple diet; but he had fed abundantly on veni-

son the day before, and now he was sensible of a craving for the taste of fish or of birds. After his ample meal of deer's meat he had slept long; in fact, contrary to his custom, he had slept not only through the rest of that day but also during practically the whole night. Not until dawn had he awakened; and it was then that the craving for fish or fowl had come upon him.

It was spring; and Koe-Ishto had no occupation at that season except the satisfying of his own appetite. The time of mating was long past. The family of four playful, yellowish, spotted cubs in the cave near the summit of Unaka Kanoos were looked after by their mother, who ministered to them with devoted care and also did her own hunting. Koe-Ishto, unburdened by domestic duties, gave no thought to the cave on Unaka Kanoos but set out immediately in search of the delicate food which he desired.

For an hour he had followed the little mountain river down its narrow gorge-like valley, jumping lightly from rock to rock, leaping with marvelous agility and grace from one to another of the gray boulders which strewed the river's bed. A dozen times he had crouched, motionless as the rocks themselves, close by deep dark pools where many trout lurked, his great paw raised, ready for the lightning-like blow which would scoop some unwary fish out

of the water; but not once in any of those pools had a trout risen to the surface within reach of that mighty paw.

Koe-Ishto realized at last that on this morning the fish were not rising; and when he had reached the lower part of the valley, where the forested mountain-slopes on either side of the stream were less steep and the great rhododendron thicket of Crystal Run began, he decided to abandon his fishing and, instead, try his luck with the wild turkeys at a certain spot where he had captured many turkeys in the past. He was on his way to this spot when the gobble of a turkey interrupted his hastily formed design against the horned owl.

Koe-Ishto gave the owl not another thought. The big bird, drowsing on its perch, never knew how close it had been to death, though it was startled out of its accustomed composure when it saw the long tawny body of the puma glide past along the trail directly under it.

Koe-Ishto no longer moved slowly; he no longer paused at each bend of the winding trail to search the dim path ahead for possible prey. He moved swiftly, purposefully, wasting no time; but, if possible, he moved even more silently than before. No stick cracked under his velvet paws; if the leaves upon which he trod stirred, only the worms and insects of the mold were aware of it. So he came

presently, like a dim, dreadful, pale-eyed ghost, to the edge of the thicket whence he could look out upon the spot which he had often utilized as a turkey ambush.

The path had brought him back again to the river; but the character of the stream had changed. At this point Crystal Run was no longer a narrow brawling mountain torrent, rushing swiftly amid great tumbled masses of rock, foaming in white waterfalls over sharp ledges under which lay dark, still, seemingly bottomless pools.

Here, where the valley was wider and flatter, the river had widened also and had become a placid shallow stream scarcely more than a foot in depth and perhaps fifty feet from shore to shore, flowing slowly over a flat bed of smooth rock and yellow sand. On the further bank the forest came down close to the water; but on the bank where the rhododendron thicket stood a clear space of level rock and dry sand intervened between the river margin and the edge of the thicket. Into this clear space an arm of the thicket, composed, however, not of rhododendrons but of alders, was thrust almost to the water's edge, forming a sort of hedge as straight as if some careful gardener had lined the bushes there.

Koe-Ishto, the puma, did not know why the wild turkeys of the mountain woods were in the habit

of coming often to this shallow part of the river to drink. He did not know why so many of them, when they had slaked their thirst, turned and walked back across the space of flat rock and sand, passing within ten feet of the alder hedge. He knew only that this often happened, that it seemed to be a habit of the turkey kind. The fact alone interested him; the reasons did not matter.

From the thicket's edge his pale eyes searched the open space before him and roved up and down the stream, seeking the gobbler whose voice he had heard perhaps five minutes before. Then he stole slowly along the alder hedge nearly to its end and crouched there utterly motionless, completely invisible.

So still was he, so perfectly did his tawny body blend with the foliage of the screening alders and the yellow sand under them, that even the far-sighted eyes of Storm-Rider, the golden eagle of Younaguska, failed to distinguish the outline of the puma's form. Yet, when a wood mouse scuttled across the flat surface of the rock near the alder hedge, Storm-Rider noted its passage instantly; and when a crayfish moved slowly across a little space of sand, the eyes of the soaring eagle picked it out and his gaze dwelt momentarily upon it.

But wood mice and crayfish were of no interest to Storm-Rider; and he was not looking for pumas either and entertained no expectation of finding one at that spot beside Crystal Run. No more than Koe-Ishto did the golden eagle understand why this particular spot was often visited by wild turkeys, and no more than Koe-Ishto was he interested in the why and wherefore of it. But just as well as the puma knew it, the eagle knew that turkeys came here often; and for the eagle of Younaguska, as well as for the great cat of Unaka Kanoos, the place had often proved a profitable hunting ground.

Unaka Kanoos reared its rocky summit near at hand. The loftier dome of Younaguska, the sacred mountain, was many miles distant. But to Storm-Rider the leagues of air were nothing. His kingdom was broad; his hunting ground stretched as far as his tireless wings could bear him in a day. For fifty miles on every side of his home on Younaguska he ruled the airy spaces above the Overhills, as the Cherokees called the high mountains; and at any spot in that vast domain he might appear at any moment to claim his booty. He circled now on motionless wings high above the shoals of Crystal Run because he, too, had become suddenly aware that morning of a craving for turkey-meat.

For some five minutes the fierce frowning eyes of the soaring eagle had been searching with peculiar

intensity the margins of the open space beside the river. He, also, had heard the turkey-call which had come to the ears of Koe-Ishto in the rhododendron thicket. From his post in the air he had been able to note accurately the direction from which the sound had come; and since then he had been waiting impatiently but confidently for the gobbler to emerge from the woods and walk across the open to the water's edge.

Suddenly the long yellow-brown body of the puma crouching in the alder hedge quivered and grew tense and hard; and in that same moment the head of the circling eagle dropped lower, his great yellow feet with their armament of black trenchant claws opened and shut convulsively, his deep-set eyes glowed momentarily as though a flash of inner fire had lit them. A half-minute more he circled quietly, his eyes never shifting from his prey. Then, his dark wings half-closed his banded tail spread, his talons opened wide beneath him, he shot downward through the singing air.

Few of the wild folk are blessed with keener hearing than the wild turkey. Yet because the roar of a distant waterfall filled the air, a fatal moment elapsed before the gobbler sensed a strange, low, humming sound, faint yet somehow portentous and menacing. Instantly he turned and raced for the rhododendron thicket. Another quarter-second and

he would have been safe within its barricade of stiff, unyielding branches; but twenty feet from its portals a great dark shape fell upon him from the sky, struck long needle-pointed claws into his neck and breast, slashed his throat with a hooked knife-edged beak which ripped through feathers and flesh and severed his wind-pipe.

Storm-Rider the golden eagle stood for a moment upon the quivering body of his victim, his wings half-spread, his proud head lifted high. Then with a scream he tore his talons loose from the turkey's body and with quick, powerful wing-beats lifted himself into the air.

He was just in time. From the hedge of alders forty feet to his right, a great tawny form was racing across the sand in long bounds. High over the bleeding prostrate turkey Koe-Ishto the puma leaped, and landing on a bare space of level rock just beyond, launched his long sinewy body upward. A big furry paw, bristling with curved retractile claws, swished like a flail not six inches under the eagle.

For a fraction of a second the fierce eyes of the king of the air looked into the pale glittering orbs of the king of the forest. Then, as the eagle's laboring wings lifted him higher, Koe-Ishto turned, walked slowly back to where the gobbler lay, picked up the big bronze bird in his jaws, and carried it to-

wards the thicket's edge, while the eagle, screaming with rage, circled well above him.

The white man has learned about birds and beasts many things which the red man never learned—things which only the white man's science could discover. But there are other things which the red man knew or believed and which are still dark to the white newcomer. This is so because the red man lived very close to the wild folk of the woods, the waters and the air, and because his very life depended on his knowledge of the wild folk.

The red man knew the great golden eagle of the mountain forests as no white man has ever known that mighty bird; and Little Wolf, the young Cherokee brave, who was a dreamer as well as a great hunter, knew the eagle even better than most of his fellows. So it may be that Little Wolf was right in his belief that it was not mere chance which brought about the strange thing that happened at the cave on Unaka Kanoos where Koe-Ishto's mate kept watch over her brood of four spotted yellowish kittens.

The sun rose that morning in a clear sky; and presently, when it had risen well above the purple wall of mountains rimming the eastern horizon, its slanting rays warmed and dried the flat shelf of

rock in front of Koe-Ishto's cave. Koe-Ishto's tawny mate, nursing her little ones just within the cave's entrance, noted this fact with joy. For days a steady drizzle had kept the puma cubs under cover. A wetting might not have harmed them, but they did not like the feel of the rain on their backs. So they had stayed inside the cave; and now their mother welcomed the sunshine because, like most human mothers, she liked her little ones to romp and play outdoors.

The wide flat ledge in front of the cave made a splendid playground for the cubs. They were safe there, for no Indian hunter had ever invaded the puma's almost inaccessible lair on the precipitous slope of Unaka Kanoos, while the preying beasts of the forests stood too much in dread of the great lion-like cats ever to approach their dwelling-place.

True, the ledge ended in a sheer drop of perhaps a hundred feet to the wooded mountain side below, and a human onlooker might on that account have considered it a perilous nursery. But the puma cubs were in no danger of falling over the ledge. Young as they were, they were wonderfully sure-footed, blessed with a marvelous gift for keeping their balance. Their mother could leave them wrestling and tussling on the ledge within a foot of its brink and remain away for hours without feeling the slightest anxiety regarding their safety.

On this morning, the first sunny morning in many days, the mother puma cut short the breakfast of her nursing kittens. She, too, disliked the rain and had postponed her hunting, remaining in the cave throughout the previous night; and now she was hungry and was eager to find meat. Presently she pushed the kittens away from her, rose, walked out upon the ledge, yawned hugely and stretched her long lithe body. Then, with a low farewell to the cubs which had followed her outside, she walked to the end of the ledge around a jutting shoulder of the rock, leaped to the slanting trunk of a big chestnut oak, and gliding lightly down its rough surface, disappeared into the forest.

Some two hours later a black speck appeared in the sky high above the summit of Unaka Kanoos. For many minutes it swung there, moving in circles and ellipses, gradually growing larger. The puma cubs, playing on the sunny ledge in front of their cave, either did not see it or, if they saw it, paid no attention to it.

Neither instinct nor the teaching, which, even at that early age, they might have had from their mother, had ever warned them of danger from above. Probably they knew vaguely that the air was peopled, for doubtless from time to time they had seen turkey vultures or a solitary raven or duck-hawk pass over; but never had any harm come to

them from these aerial wayfarers which as yet were the only ones among the wild folk that their eyes had ever looked upon.

Storm-Rider, the golden eagle of Younaguska, looked down from the high air and saw on a sunny ledge of Unaka Kanoos four small furry creatures which moved erratically here and there. Whether or not he knew what they were; whether or not he recognized them as the young of Koe-Ishto the puma; whether or not there flashed into his brain at that moment memory of the morning not long ago when Koe-Ishto had robbed him of his prey—these are questions which no man can answer. But certain it is that, after watching them for a while, he spiraled gradually downward for perhaps five hundred feet, then closed his wide wings and plunged.

If the puma cubs heard the low hum of his coming, they did not know what it was or what it meant. If they saw that living spearhead shooting down from the sky, pinions half-opened now, widespread talons thrust beneath it, trenchant beak pointing straight downward, they saw it too late to regain the shelter of the cave.

Storm-Rider chose as his target the cub which happened to be closest to the brink of the precipice. A moment the baby pumas crouched in terror as the air, buffeted by mighty wings, swirled and eddied

around them. Then curved grappling hooks closed upon one of them and lifted him from the rock. In the ears of the three others rang the golden eagle's scream of triumph as he swept outward from the ledge with his victim.

In front of the round hut of Kana the Conjuror the braves of the Cherokee town sat in a half-circle, their bronze faces lit by the fire burning in front of Kana's low door. Behind the braves stood the women and girls, Pakale the Blossom in their midst. Facing the throng, Kana sat at one side of the fire. At the other side, wearing the ornaments and feathers which were symbols of their rank, sat Tiftoe, the aged chief, and Sanuta, the War Captain, father of Little Wolf.

Little Wolf stood in the center in the full light of the fire; and beside him, resting his hand on a large object over which a deerskin had been thrown, stood his friend Striking Hawk, Pakale's brother. Little Wolf spoke, addressing himself to the chief.

"I have come," he said, "as I promised. For many days and nights I have kept watch in the woods with Striking Hawk, my comrade. I have come to prove Kana a false conjurer whose wisdom is deceit. Listen and I will relate what we have seen, and Striking Hawk will tell you if I lie.

“Kana put shame upon me because I said that there was war between Koe-Ishto, the Cat of God, whose lair is on Unaka Kanoos, and Storm-Rider, the eagle of Younaguska, the sacred mountain. Kana said that I lied.

“For many days, with Striking Hawk by my side, I watched in the woods where Koe-Ishto hunts and searched the air where Storm-Rider seeks his prey. My task was hard, for the forest is vast and many things happen there unseen. But I knew where to look and the Great Spirit was good. One morning, by the shoals of the Crystal Water, where the turkeys drink, we saw Storm-Rider fall from the air upon a turkey, and saw Koe-Ishto the puma leap from his ambush and rob the eagle of his prey.”

A murmur ran around the circle of braves. A louder murmur was heard among the women and girls. But Little Wolf raised his hand.

“It was good,” he said, “but it was not enough. The spirit told me to keep watch at the cave where Koe-Ishto’s mate nurses her little ones. For three days we watched there, hidden on the mountain side in a place which I knew; and the Spirit sent rain and a favoring breeze so that Koe-Ishto’s mate never scented us nor knew that we were near. And on the fourth morning, when the she-puma had gone out to get meat, we saw Storm-Rider, the eagle, fall from the sky and seize a cub in his claws.”

Kana the Conjuror rose, drew to its full height his lean body streaked with paint and decked with feathers, and pointed an accusing finger at the young brave.

“Little Wolf lies,” he cried in a high cracked voice. “His words are empty as wind. Let him be dry-scratched with snakes’ teeth and scourged from the town with rawhide thongs. For he comes with lies, bringing no proof, and such as he cannot dwell among us.”

Little Wolf turned to Striking Hawk and spoke a guttural word. The latter, with a quick motion, removed the deerskin covering the object at his feet. The eager braves saw a large cage made of willow withes. On a perch in the cage stood a splendid golden eagle.

Little Wolf spoke again.

“I bring proofs which all must believe,” he said. “With a blunt arrow I shot at Storm-Rider as he flew over our ambush with the cub. It was a far shot, but again the Spirit was good. The blunt arrow struck the eagle’s wing and brought him down. This is he in the cage—Storm-Rider, the golden eagle of Younaguska. When his wing is healed, I will set him free.”

The young warrior paused for a moment, his gaze fixed on Kana. But the Conjuror was staring with wide panic-stricken eyes at Striking Hawk who,

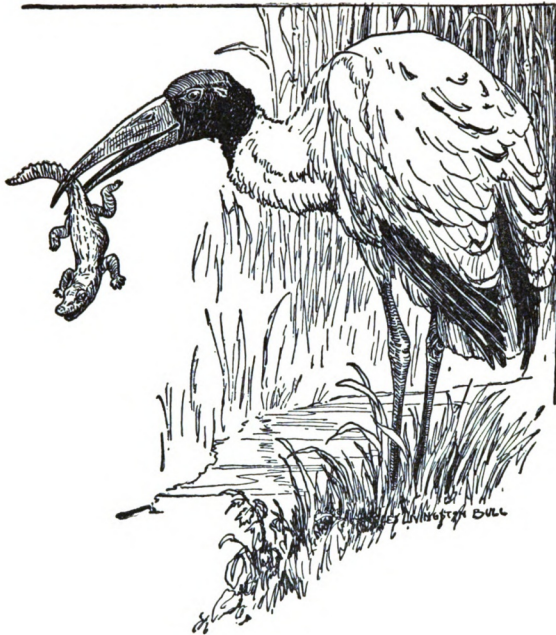
almost unnoticed, had slipped for a moment out of the glare of the firelight to the spot where his sister, Pakale the Blossom, stood among the maidens. Pakale had given him something which she had kept concealed under her loose garment and the youth was now returning with it to his post beside his friend.

Little Wolf laughed in triumph.

"Kana sees his doom," he cried. "He sees in Striking Hawk's hand the puma cub, the whelp of Koe-Ishto, which Storm-Rider captured. Let him come nearer and he can see on it the marks of Storm-Rider's claws."

The young brave turned and faced Tiftoe, the aged chief.

"Now let it be known," he said in a low tone which was his tribute to the chief's authority, "whether it is Little Wolf, or Kana, the false conjurer, that must be scourged from the town."



The King of the River

THE KING OF THE RIVER

THE king of the river was predestined to adventure. It was his heritage and he accepted it phlegmatically, as he accepted all things, both good and ill. His adventures began early in his career—on the day when he first saw the light. They began not gradually or mildly, but grimly and fiercely, and it was only a fortunate chance that prevented his first day from being his last. But the king of the river had also been born lucky. The outcome of that first day's encounter marked the beginning of his luck.

He lay with twenty-seven of his brothers and sisters in the warm shallow water close to the edge of a small cypress-bordered lagoon. He was very tired, for he had just made a long journey—a journey of more than two hundred yards from the dry ridge in the swamp, where the alligator nest was situated, to the margin of the lonely swamp lake which was to be the home of his youth. The eight-foot saurian which had laid the eggs in that nest, covering them with sand and leaves and committing them to the care of the sun, had not returned when the time for hatching came, and the little black-

and-yellow gators had no guide save unerring instinct.

Automatically, that one of them who was afterwards to be king of the river took command. He was fully nine inches long, longer by an inch than any of the others, and doubtless it was his superior size and strength that put him in the van as the strange procession started for the lagoon. So it fell to him to break a path through the lush weeds and stiff grasses, and when at last he reached a small shallow cove of the little woods lake he was too weary to swim on to the broader reaches beyond.

He lay at the surface of the still wine-brown water, in the midst of his brothers and sisters, basking in the warm sunshine, despite his weariness deliciously content; and as he lay thus, indolently enjoying his first taste of life, death came out of the rank reeds along the shore of the cove and struck right and left, claiming a victim at each stroke. For the tall white-and-black wood ibis who had been standing motionless as a statue at the edge of the water, his long bill resting on his chest, the arrival of the gator family was an unexpected piece of luck, and he was quick to take advantage of it.

A wise old bird was this long-legged, long-necked ibis. He moved not a muscle or a feather as he watched the little saurians come down through the narrow fringe of short marsh. Only when the last

of them had reached the water did he stir. Then, hidden from them by a small peninsula of reeds, he hurried with swift awkward strides to the feast.

His mandibles gaped greedily, his wide, white, black-tipped wings were half open as he stalked like a tall ghost out of the reeds into the midst of his victims. If they saw him coming the instinct which was their only friend in the hard battle for life could not warn them in that brief instant that here was a foe who would cut life short before it had well begun. Down flashed the stout curved bill, its mandibles closed, a heavy, sharp-pointed pickax of which the ibis' long sinewy neck formed the handle—down, then up, down in another place, up once more, then down again with marvelous quickness and with perfect aim. Each time the pickax fell it fell upon a baby gator, generally striking the little saurian on the domelike head or just where neck and body joined. Six in all the ibis slew or stunned in quick succession before the survivors, awake at last to the danger, scuttled out to the deeper water or hid themselves under the duckweed and green slime. Then, with half a dozen victims dead or insensible behind him, the slayer opened his mandibles, thrust out his long neck and seized a seventh just as it was disappearing under a lily pad.

This seventh victim was he who was afterwards

to be known as king of the river. He dangled by his tail from the ibis' bill as the tall bird stalked toward the shore; and it was fortunate for him that heavy rains had raised the water level of the cove, covering the dead logs and cypress knees that ordinarily studded its surface at that point. Had there been a log close at hand, the ibis would have killed him instantly by slapping his head against it; but the only log visible lay on the shore close to the spot where the gator procession had come down to the water's edge.

The ibis strode with swift steps toward this log which was to serve as an execution block for the little gator hanging from his bill; but because a tangle of smilax lay in front of the log, between it and the edge of the water, he did not approach it directly. Making a slight detour, he followed for ten feet or so the faint trail which the gator procession had made, then turned toward the log from the landward side where no smilax vines would hamper the movements of his head as he hammered his captive to death.

Preoccupied with the pressing business in hand, he did not see the furry form crouching close to the ground behind the smooth gray-green trunk of a young sycamore close beside the trail. He turned his back on the sycamore and took two steps toward the execution log; and instantly the gray fox, his

delicate feet lightly touching the ground, skimmed silently over the grass and weeds and leaped upon him from the rear. It was a stroke of fortune for the fox. He had picked up the trail of the gator family on the ridge in the swamp and had followed it as fast as he could, hoping to overtake the procession before it reached the water. But this tall white-and-black bird would furnish sweeter meat than the meat of baby gators; and, big though the bird was, the fox, landing squarely upon the ibis' back, knew how to chop that long neck neatly and effectively from behind.

This was the first manifestation of the luck that was to follow the future king of the river through the first months of his life—those perilous months when, far from being lord of all the water wild folk, he was among the least formidable of them all and was beset on all sides by enemies of many kinds against whom he had no defense except instinct and the cunning that grew in him as he grew.

This cunning must have begun to develop very early. Perhaps there was a hint of it in his behavior on that first day when, as the stricken ibis struggled in the throes of death, the little gator, released from the grip of that cruel bill, did not make straight for the water as blind instinct might have directed. Had

he done so, he would have been spotted instantly by the fox, which would have had baby gator as an appetizer. Instead, he crawled very slowly under the log at a point where it was raised a little from the ground and buried himself in the muck, lying there utterly motionless until the gray-and-russet killer had feasted and had gone on his way. If the fox's nose told him that there was a little gator under the log, he was well fed by that time and did not think it worth while to dig the youngster out.

Thenceforward the baby saurian knew that danger lurked in the shallows along the margins of the lagoon. Whether this knowledge was merely instinct awakened by his encounter with the ibis, or whether it was the beginning of the wisdom that developed in his small brain as the months passed, it was a decisive factor in carrying him through his perilous babyhood. He still kept mainly to the shallows, for somehow he knew that there were even greater dangers in the brown translucent depths; but always he had a sharp eye open for tall birds which frequented the lagoon margins—for wood ibises, which he saw only occasionally, and for herons, which he saw in great numbers every day. The small life of the warm teeming waters afforded him abundant food; and all the while he was growing, not slowly, as most people suppose that alligators grow, but very fast.

The first and most dangerous season of his babyhood was also the shortest. A few weeks after he had emerged from the egg came the cool weather of fall; and, burying himself in the mud near the edge of the lagoon, he slept through the winter in peace. When he reappeared in early March he entered upon a period of still swifter growth. By the end of that summer he had more than doubled his length, and as he grew longer and bulkier the number of his enemies decreased. When he emerged from his second winter sleep the tall birds of the lagoon margins no longer terrified him; and that same summer he turned the tables on his feathered foes.

His warfare against the feathered water folk began on a modest scale. Many gallinules nested in wampee beds along the sunny margins and on floating islands of aquatic plants in the open spaces, while at least half a dozen wood duck mothers had laid their eggs in deep holes dug in dead pines by big red-crested pileated woodpeckers or logcocks, giants of the woodpecker tribe. The saurian inhabitants of the lagoon, both large and small, took toll of the downy ducklings and the little gallinules; and now and again the yawning jaws of a big gator, rising suddenly from the depths, engulfed a parent bird.

It was late summer before the future king of the

river had his first taste of revenge on the tall javelin-billed waders that had loomed so large among the ogres of his babyhood. One sunny morning, as he lay at the surface close to the shore, a great blue heron, which probably mistook the young gator for a small log, lit so near him that a sudden flirt of his muscular tail knocked the heron's stiltlike legs from under him. In an instant the saurian's long jaws clamped upon the bird's body, and in another half second the heron had been pulled into deep water. Two other young gators, attracted by the commotion, laid hold of the draggled bloody body and helped to tear it to pieces and devour it.

One more blow the tribes of the air were to strike at their saurian enemy; but before that happened a great change came to pass. In late summer came torrential rains continuing for many days. All the swamps of the Low Country were filled to overflowing, and the water level of the lagoon rose until the highest of the old watermarks on the bulging trunks of the cypresses were four inches under the surface. Dry swales and bottoms became pools or ponds, and the lagoon, as its level rose, sent out long arms of water, reaching like tentacles far off through the woods.

Exploring one of these new coves of the lagoon one September day, the future king of the river pushed on and on until he crossed a divide and came

to the edge of the river ricefields. It was easier then to go on than to go back; and presently he was swimming down an old ricefield canal which led through a sunny wilderness of big round lotus leaves covering the abandoned flooded rice lands as far as the eye could see. The canal deepened as he swam on, emptying finally into another canal, which in turn emptied into a creek. Down this creek he followed the ebbing tide; and at last, in midafternoon, he came to the river of which he was destined to be king, and the cypress lagoon of his babyhood knew him no more.

The change was an advantageous one. Fish formed his staple food and the river teemed with fish of many kinds, while the scores of canals and ditches extending from the river far across the wet rice lands on either side of the winding stream were inexhaustible hunting grounds. The young gator fed bounteously and grew faster than ever. He was big enough now to prey on the biggest of the black bass; purple gallinules which lived in the lotus fields occasionally fell victim to him; once he was lucky enough to dine on an unwary marsh rabbit; and once a young raccoon, which rashly attempted to swim a break in a ricefield bank, afforded him a sumptuous repast.

Little by little he was learning strategy. At a certain bend of the river many kingbirds perched

on snags and sticks projecting from the soft sloping mud exposed along the banks at low tide. An inch above that mud innumerable winged insects darted and danced, and on these the kingbirds fed. Barn swallows, also, skimming with infinite grace back and forth above the marginal mud flats, preyed on these insect hosts, and never a wing of a swallow touched the mud. But the kingbirds, swooping down from their sticks and snags, often patted the mud with their wings. That mud was like oily glue. Little wings that patted it were sometimes held fast by it, and many kingbirds were thus trapped. Once they fell upon the mud, it incased them all over, clogging their feathers, rendering them incapable of flight.

Close to the edge of the water the young gator found a panting kingbird lying helpless. He swallowed the bird; then, slipping back into the water, he resumed his sun bath, lying six feet or so from the shore, only his eyes and nostrils showing above the surface. Soon he saw another kingbird touch the mud with its wing, flutter wildly, then lie still. This bird, too, he caught; and thenceforward for a week, while the kingbird migration was at its height, he found it profitable to lie in wait by the muddy margins at low tide. Late one afternoon, however, when the sun was sinking through crimson-dyed skies toward the distant purple woods beyond the

lotus fields, something happened that cured him of this habit.

He had not learned to look for peril from above. His periscope eyes, projecting from the surface, kept keen watch upon the river and the river margins, but they neglected the upper spaces of the air. He was swimming slowly when the blow fell, his body barely submerged; and the red shafts of the late sunlight, shimmering and glinting on the myriad wavelets of the river, must have deceived the great white-headed eagle hurrying homeward after a long journey to distant hunting grounds.

Perhaps the eagle had hunted vainly that day and, mistaking the young gator's submerged body for a slow-moving fish, decided that this was one of those rare occasions when he would deign to do his own fishing instead of having his underlings, the ospreys, perform that service for him. At any rate, the moment he saw the gator gliding slowly through the rippling shallows close to the muddy margin where the kingbirds perched on their snags, he closed his wide wings and plunged, his legs thrust downward, his trenchant talons spread to the utmost.

In a whirl of wind from wildly beating wings, and in a shower of spray, those claws struck the saurian's back and side just behind the forelegs. The leathery plates of his back were not pierced; but on

his flank, where the hide was less tough, the long claws penetrated deeply, so deeply that they could not be withdrawn. Once the eagle screamed—a farewell, perhaps, to the wide skies and the lonely swamp woods and the river lotus fields and marshes which he had known for nearly fifty years; but whether or not in that instant he realized his fate, he fought fiercely and bravely to wrench himself free as the terror-stricken young gator raced for the deeper water. For ten yards or so the river bottom shelved gradually, and for that distance the proud white head and the laboring wings remained above the surface. Then suddenly they vanished.

The years passed, and year by year the king of the river grew in length and bulk and cunning. A time came when he was king in fact, lord of all the river wild folk and afraid of no wild creature of the waters, the woods, or the air. Of monstrous girth and stretching fully fourteen feet from nose to tail tip, he was the greatest gator that the river had seen in half a century—a dragonlike monarch of the waters, rivaling those mighty saurians of the old days that lived out their allotted span because their armor was proof against the red man's weapons. That time had long gone by. Though the saurian race still abounded in the beautiful winding rivers

and the deep swamps of the Low Country, it was seldom now that any member of that race lived long enough to attain a length of twelve feet. Soon or late, buckshot or rifle bullet found a vital spot; and it was only the great cunning of the king of the river—and perhaps the good luck that had seemed to attend him from the start—that kept him safe for so long.

Man was now the only foe that he feared; but so intense was his fear of man that it was the ruling passion of his life, shaping and directing all his activities. The selection of his basking places on the shore and of his dens under the river banks and the old ricefield dams, his comings and goings, his hunting expeditions and forays—all these depended upon and were governed by the degree of man-danger involved. Yet now and again he hit back at his dreaded foeman. He became an adept at hog stealing, skillfully stalking the half-wild woods hogs where they came down to wallow in the mud, seizing them in his huge jaws or knocking them senseless with his powerful tail. Several times man had provided him with even choicer meat—small 'possum dogs and coon dogs from the negro cabins; and once a fine imported setter, ignorant of the dangers lurking in the Low Country waters in the warm season, found her way into his insatiable maw.

Again and again, in spite of his cunning, death all but had him. Once he was hooked—caught on a set line baited with a dead gallinule suspended six inches above the water with a big shark hook imbedded in its carcass. Fortunately for him, a section of old rope, with which the line had been pieced out, was too rotten to withstand his struggles. He was never hooked again—the one lesson was enough.

Gunners were more dangerous foes. He carried much lead in his body, some of it in his head, for he had been wounded at least a dozen times, and three of these wounds were serious; but the gator, though more vulnerable than is commonly supposed, is exceedingly tenacious of life, and the bigger he is the harder it is to kill him. Because, in common with all his kind, he slept all winter in a secret den extending far back under the river bank, the river king was out of harm's way during the greater part of the period when human hunters were numerous in his domain; for when once summer had come to the Low Country, not many white men cared to brave the almost intolerable heat of the fresh-water rivers and lagoons. A few negro fishermen were even then abroad, but he had learned that these were not so greatly to be feared. They seldom took their rusty single-barreled shotguns with them when they went fishing, and they were not often tempted to

waste their precious buckshot shells upon so difficult a target as a gator's eyes—two knobs, scarcely bigger than a pair of walnuts, projecting from the surface of the water some sixty or seventy yards away.

One afternoon in early April, when there was a sharper nip in the air than the king of the river liked, he passed through a gap in a ricefield bank and made his way along deep canals leading from the river to the landward edge of the ricefields. Presently, when he was sure that no man was near, he drew his huge body out upon the bank, which was merely a low dyke shaded by tall moss-bannered cypresses. Following a well-marked gator crawl, for many years a pathway for numberless saurians, he crossed this dike and entered the clear brown water of a long serpentine lagoon behind it. For half a mile he swam up the middle of this lagoon, only his eyes and nostrils visible. Swinging around a willow-covered point of land, he came into a hidden cove, secluded and still, surrounded on three sides by a dense growth of young cypresses in which perched many black-crowned night herons. At the end of the cove rose a high yet gently sloping bank facing the sun; and on this bank, basking in the warmth, lay six large alligators, ranging in size from eight to eleven feet, while from the water nearby pro-

truded the grotesque heads and the rough, rugged, black backs of ten or twelve other saurians.

The king of the river had not expected to find the cove so crowded. He had not foreseen that the same reason which brought him there—the fact that this high westward-facing bank was an especially fine basking place on this unusually chilly April afternoon—would attract many others of his kind also. His favorite spot was already occupied by a big ten-foot bull, but the latter hastily made way for the saurian monarch as he drew his vast bulk out upon the shore.

For an hour he lay motionless among his fellows, drowsy yet watchful, his broad flat head facing the water, his long, jagged, perpendicularly flattened tail curved behind him. Then a sharp crack shattered the heavy silence of the cove and the dark water all along the bank surged and heaved as six ponderous armored bodies slid down the slope and plunged beneath the surface.

The king of the river had not moved. Just behind his right eye a black-red spot appeared and slowly grew larger. Soon his cavernous jaws gaped widely, his huge plated head twisted a little to the left, his ridged tail writhed slowly back and forth. A shudder shook his giant frame. Then he lay still, while a dark rivulet of blood trickled down the bank toward the water.

A canoe, which had emerged from behind the point of willows far up the cove, came skimming across the glassy surface. The white man who sat in the bow, a rifle across his knees, had not yet recovered from his amazement, though he carefully concealed this fact from his negro paddler. He was not a Low Countryman, but an uplander who had come to the Low Country to fish for black bass, and it pleased him to pretend that he made astonishing shots like this as a matter of course. He leaped out of the canoe the moment its bow touched the bank and, disregarding the negro's word of caution, advanced toward his victim.

Luckily for him, he was just beyond the danger zone when the king of the river came to life. So swiftly that the man's eye could scarcely follow the sweep of the long tail, the great gator's massive body bent itself like a bow, then instantly straightened. The man leaped back and, jerking the rifle to his shoulder, fired into the heaving water where a colossal black bulk, catapulted outward from the bank by the powerful muscles of that mighty tail, had vanished as if by magic.

Fifty feet from the shore the king of the river came to the surface. Straight down the middle of the cove he rushed, his juggernaut head and eight feet of his armored rugged back showing above the water. Madness had him—madness that was some-

thing more than a frenzy of terror and pain. The bullet which had entered his skull and temporarily paralyzed his body seemed now to have paralyzed instinct also. To the right of him, to the left and ahead the water spouted in little jets as the rifle bullets struck, but the great saurian did not submerge. Like a submarine with half its deck awash, he raced on at full speed, while the night herons, startled by the fusillade, flapped and croaked above him.

A bullet ripped a furrow in the armor of his back, but even this did not send him down to the depths where he would have found safety. Yet, if the instinct that should have kept him under water was dead for a time, he seemed to know even in his madness where he was going. Sometimes a gator, suddenly recovering consciousness after an almost fatal shot, charges aimlessly about at the surface, swimming frantically in circles or even driving himself up on the bank. But the king of the river, in that wild race, somehow held a straight course. Halfway down the cove, another bullet seared his back; but when at last he reached the end of the cove and, turning into the main lagoon, swung broadside to the gunner, the range was too great for any save a master rifleman.

An osprey, circling above the lower reaches of the lagoon, saw a huge black shape go surging by

beneath him, sending out on either side long waves that rustled and whispered along the reedy margins. A gray fox, walking the cypress-shaded dike between the lagoon and the abandoned ricefields, quickened his pace as a dragon-like saurian charged straight for the dike and, rearing his gigantic dripping body out of the water, waddled awkwardly yet with surprising speed along the gator crawl and into the deep canal beyond. A lithe snake-bodied mink, about to swim the canal near the gap where it emptied into the river, heard a sound as of a swiftly moving boat, and, hiding amid the reeds, watched the river king race past along the narrow waterway.

In the river tide was ebbing. The wounded saurian, still swimming with frenzied energy, swung downstream with the current. The setting sun turned the rippling water to bronze, which changed to silver when the moon came up above the forest on the eastern bank; and in that ghostly, glimmering radiance a negro, crossing the river in his little bateau after a visit to his sweetheart's cabin, was suddenly aware of a monstrous black beast of the waters rushing down upon him. Groaning with superstitious terror, the man hid his face in his hands, and the bateau pitched and rocked as the monster surged past not five feet from the square bow. Miles farther down, well below the point

where his river joined another river to form one of the main water highways of the Low Country, the mad gator met the flood tide. For some distance he bucked the current; but as its sweep grew stronger, little by little he turned and, swinging far over toward the eastern bank, headed back upstream.

His frenzy was passing now, or else his strength was giving out. He drifted rather than swam, and the current kept him near the eastern shore. Hence, when he reached the place where the river divided, it was the eastern branch that he ascended and not the western, down which he had come and which would take him back to his home. On and on he drifted for hours—weak, dazed, suffering, but no longer insane, dully conscious of his surroundings. At last, passing close to the mouth of a marsh gully, he propelled himself with feeble movements of his tail into this small waterway and came to rest on a mud bank just within the entrance.

In this strange manner the king of the river came to a new country. It was in early April that he came; and about the middle of the following September, Sandy Jim Mayfield, the hawk-faced, white-haired woodsman who lived at the edge of a big swamp near the eastern river, set himself two tasks—two tasks that were much to his taste. He would

kill the great gator that was known as the king of the river and whose cunning had become famous in that region of the Low Country; and he would nail to his dining-room wall, bristling with more than fifty sets of antlers taken by him and his three sons, the massive, strangely palmated antlers of the big whitetail buck that had taken up his abode that spring in a laurel bottom near the southern end of the swamp.

These were undertakings which would test Mayfield's skill, but would surely add to his fame as a hunter and woodsman—the only sort of fame for which the old swamp ranger gave a snap of his horny fingers. For Sandy Jim, supremely confident of his own woodcraft, never doubted his success. Before the first frost of October the great armored hide of the river king would be drying in Mayfield's yard; and even sooner than that—for he preferred deer hunting to gator hunting—the splendid antlers of the flat-horned buck of Laurel Bay would be hoisted to the place of honor above the fireplace of the big room where Sandy Jim and his sons dined and smoked and talked, sometimes about crops, but more often about deer and dogs.

Mayfield lost no time in carrying out his plans. During the long Low Country summer the old woodsman was always lazy and indifferent; but invariably, as autumn drew near, his interest in life

revived—and life for him meant hunting. That afternoon he saddled his wiry claybank mare and rode off through the pinelands toward the river rice-fields. He had an idea that the flat-horned buck had taken to lying amid the reeds on a certain causeway, long ago fallen into disuse, connecting a large wooded island at the river's edge with the mainland. The spot was difficult of access and Mayfield had no expectation of getting a shot at the buck that afternoon; but he wanted to locate the animal's bed as a step in preparation for the hunt which he planned for the next morning.

Riding along the edge of the wooded highland toward the place where the ruined causeway made out across the green wilderness of the old rice fields, Sandy Jim suddenly slapped his thigh. He had learned much about the habits of the giant gator which had appeared in the river that spring and whose thunderous voice, deeper, more resonant, more menacing than any other voice of the springtime saurian chorus, had first apprised Mayfield of the monster's coming. But he had never discovered this great gator's basking place. Now, on a sudden, the woodsman believed that he understood why. Almost the only suitable locality that he had failed to examine was the muddy slope at a certain point on the old causeway toward which he was riding. He had never thought of looking there; the in-

accessibility of the spot caused him to forget it; and now, as he turned the matter over in his mind, suspicion ripened to conviction.

He rode a quarter of a mile out of his way to a little knoll where a stunted live oak looked out over the wide wastes of river marsh. With almost simian litheness, in spite of his seventy years, he swung his light body from the saddle to the first of the live oak's limbs and climbed thirty feet up into the tree. For two minutes he gazed across the green expanse at a sunny spot on the slope of the causeway where the loop of a creek came in to the bank. When he dropped from the oak limb and reached for the shotgun which he had leaned against the tree trunk, his thin keen face looked more than ever like that of a hunting hawk.

A half hour later, the king of the river, stretched at full length close to the water's edge, woke suddenly. Perhaps he had felt the ground quiver slightly under him. The flat-horned buck had made no sound as he rose hurriedly from his bed in the tall reeds on the high level top of the causeway; but possibly the impact of his feet on the hard earth had sent an almost imperceptible tremor along the bank and down the muddy slope. Yet, of the three gators dozing there in the security of the safest basking place within many miles, only the river king awoke.

He awoke, but he did not move. For two minutes, perhaps, he lay motionless as a log. Then from the reeds fifteen feet above him came a snort, followed by the sound of deers' hoofs hitting the sun-baked clay. Swiftly but noiselessly the leviathan form of the king of the river slid into the wine-brown water and vanished.

Five minutes after the great gator's disappearance, Sandy Jim Mayfield reached the point on the slope of the causeway for which he had been heading and saw what he had expected to see. Working his way on foot through the reeds, he had heard the snort of the flat-horned buck as the wily creature winded him and gave warning to the does; and, knowing the river king's reputation for wariness and wisdom, he considered it almost certain that the big saurian also had heard that snort and had interpreted it correctly. Hence, though he still pushed on slowly and cautiously toward the spot from which he had hoped to shoot the river king, he felt that his caution was wasted. The other gators which he had seen when he climbed the live oak might still be basking on the sunny slope, but he would not find the monster whose life he had sworn to take.

The old woodsman smiled as he crouched in the cover of the reeds, slowly drawing a bead on the larger of the two saurians still dozing on the mud. He was disappointed, yet pleased. This king of the

river, as he had heard the negroes call the saurian monarch, was a foeman worthy of his steel. Sandy Jim realized that he would need all his skill if he expected to stretch that great armored hide before the October frosts.

Many things Sandy Jim Mayfield knew about the deer and the alligators of the Low Country, for all his life he had lived close to these wild creatures, and all his life he had hunted them. But there were two things that he did not know—two things of primary importance to him just now. He did not know that the great gator, against whose cunning he had so confidently matched his own experience and skill, never waited until the October frosts before going into seclusion for the cold season, but always retired to his winter den in advance of most of his fellows, as soon as the crisp nights of September announced the approach of fall; and he did not know that the flat-horned buck, whose splendid antlers he so ardently desired, was that rare thing, a roaming, wandering whitetail, which, instead of remaining year after year in the same general region, ranged widely about the Low Country, never lingering in any district where he was persistently hunted. Three days after Mayfield's fruitless attempt to stalk the king of the river on the ruined causeway came a cold change and the giant saurian was seen no more that season. Three times Mayfield and his

sons hunted the flat-horned buck with their full pack of lanky, long-eared hounds, and on the third hunt, Sandy Jim, trying a snap shot from his mare's back, thought that he had drawn blood. But after that hunt the flat-horned buck vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed him, and never once that fall or winter was hair or hide or track of him seen again.

Chagrined at his failure, Mayfield consoled himself as best he could. The buck, he believed, would return sooner or later, for these were among the best feeding grounds for deer in all the Low Country. As for the king of the river, he would come forth from his secret den with the first warm breath of spring and he would come forth bold and hungry, craving red meat. Until he had filled his empty stomach he would be less cautious than usual. A yelping cur tethered at the water's edge would interest him tremendously. Sandy Jim bided his time.

March came in windy and chill, but toward the end of the month the weather broke and spring burst suddenly upon the Low Country in a blaze of sunshine and a glory of song. Maples flamed in the swamps; the wood-edges swarmed with varicolored warblers; the wild turkey hens built their nests of grass, pine straw and cane leaves in the

deep woods and the thicket-grown broom-grass fields; long-necked, long-tailed anhingas swung round and round like airplanes in the still upper air; tall blue herons and slim white egrets walked about over the flooded rice lands along the river flats. Sandy Jim heard a few gator voices at dawn and toward dusk, but the big bulls had not yet begun to make their dragon music. He heard no bellow which might be the challenge of the river king.

On the first warm day Mayfield, sitting hunched in his narrow square-nosed punt, his rifle leaning against the thwart in front of him, scouted the river, the ricefield canals and the long cypress-bordered backwater which made in from the creek a mile behind his house. On the second day he searched with equal diligence. On the third day, as he rested in the shade under the sycamores near the backwater's upper end, he heard the music of hounds.

They were his own dogs, he knew, and he remembered suddenly that his sons, weary of pork and butts meat, had planned one more deer hunt before the weather grew too warm. The law forbade spring deer hunting, but the law meant little in that remote corner of the Low Country. Sandy Jim, sitting cross-legged in his punt, listened eagerly to what his dogs were saying, comprehending their meaning as clearly as though they spoke his own tongue.

They told him that a deer had been jumped on the low myrtle-grown peninsula between the house and the backwater. That peninsula was both a haven and a trap. If the hunters guarded its upper end, the deer must run down the length of it toward the backwater and the flooded rice lands. With the pack pressing him hard, and with the whoops of the hunters sounding near at hand, he would hardly take to the open water on either side, but would run on and swim the deep break at the peninsula's lower end to reach the remnant of a low, narrow, marshy dike which, in the old rice-planting days, had divided the upper backwater from the lower. There he would be safe if hounds and hunters halted at the break. But if hounds or hunters swam the break and followed along the dike he would be doomed; for a dense mat of telanthera, a floating water growth through which no deer could swim, bordered the dike on both sides and inclosed its lower end. Thus the place was a blind alley, a cul-de-sac, from which there was no escape.

Sandy Jim reviewed the situation swiftly. Then a grim smile twisted his hawklike face. His boys had chosen to hunt without him. He would show them something little to their liking. Knowing his sons, his dogs and every inch of the ground, he needed no clairvoyant powers to foretell the outcome of that hunt.

With long noiseless strokes of the paddle he drove the punt forward, heading down the upper backwater toward the dike at its lower end. Myrtles and young cedars bordered the dike for the greater part of its length, but there was one clear stretch of fully twenty yards where the deer must pass in full view; and Sandy Jim remembered a bushy willow, growing out of the butt of a great rotting log in the backwater, which would make an ideal ambush. Presently he wedged the punt's bow between two low branches of this willow and waited, rifle in hand, listening to the music of the oncoming pack.

Other ears hearkened to that music. The king of the river lay in the lower backwater fifty yards from the dike, his eyes and nostrils projecting above the glassy surface. That morning he had emerged from his winter den under the river bank; but the river water was still too cool to suit him, and he had cruised up the creek and had passed through a hidden tunnel under a ricefield dam into the backwater's lower sunny reaches where no currents stirred the slender water weeds. He had scarcely reached the place that he had in mind when the dogs' voices came to him; and instantly he was aware of a fierce, terrible hunger, the sequel of his long winter fast—hunger which would brook no delay.

The sudden craving for meat took possession of

him. He remembered a morning months ago when he had seen a dog trail a marsh rabbit along the low narrow dike toward which the pack seemed now to be heading. His periscope eyes began to slide across the surface of the water. At the outer edge of the thick carpet of water growths bordering the dike the eyes vanished. A minute later the gigantic head of the river king was thrust upward through the telanthera carpet near its inner margin.

A moment the huge head remained motionless, a dreadful apparition, incredibly sinister, the enormous jaws gaping slightly revealing long, conical, pointed teeth. An exultant burst of melody, louder than ever, rang out on the myrtle-grown peninsula a quarter of a mile away. With a surge and heave the monstrous black body of the giant saurian, trailing long weeds from the spines and ridges of its armor, reared itself out of the water and mounted the bank.

Sandy Jim Mayfield, alert and watchful behind the bushy willow in the upper backwater, jerked his rifle to his shoulder as he saw the vast bulk of the king of the river appear on the dike within fairly easy range. It was the opportunity for which the old woodsman had been waiting all winter, yet he let it pass. Like a flash his quick mind foresaw the

drama that was preparing; and instantly, too, he realized that in the enactment of that drama he might find an opportunity even better than this one. Only for a moment did he see the river king clearly. No sooner had the great saurian mounted the dike than he sank on his belly amid the tall dark-green rushes bordering it on both sides. These hid his head and most of his body from Mayfield's view, but the woodsman knew that the monster was lying on the low flattened ridge of the narrow bank, his head facing the quarter from which the dogs would come.

Mayfield figured the chances rapidly. He did not wish to lose a hound; yet he was keen to see what would happen. A few minutes more would tell the story. The dogs were nearing the break at the peninsula's lower end, and the deer must be swimming the break or already running along the dike. Myrtles extended in a dense hedge to within twenty feet of the place where the giant gator lay in ambush, and Sandy Jim could not see the deer until it had passed the last of these. He waited, every muscle taut, his rifle raised halfway to his shoulder.

A long-bodied, gray-brown shape shot into view from behind the last of the myrtles. Mayfield straightened suddenly in his seat and muttered an exclamation of amazement. Beyond a shadow of a doubt it was the flat-horned buck. His antlers

were in velvet and were as yet scarcely half their full size, but the old woodsman knew that buck as well as he knew his own sons. Head held high, white flag jerking from side to side, the splendid stag bounded along the narrow bank, racing at full speed, yet appearing singularly deliberate and unconcerned, his dun body rising and falling with exquisite grace as he floated over the tall rushes and the low treacherous tangles of vine. He did not see the great gator lying in his path until he was almost upon the saurian and he had no time to prepare for the leap. Yet without hesitation, and apparently without extra effort, he soared with birdlike buoyancy more than twenty feet and, landing lightly and airily as though the leap were nothing, bounded on without a backward glance along the dike and into the cover of the screening myrtles beyond.

Mayfield, crouching in his punt, swore delightedly. Once, on the reed-grown causeway, the flat-horned buck had saved the king of the river. Now, by a strange trick of fate, the king of the river was squaring that account. The dogs had crossed the break and were coming in full cry. If nothing stopped them, in another five minutes they would bring the buck to bay at the dike's lower end where he must turn and face them or else drown miserably in the dense mat of floating water growths. But

Mayfield knew that no dog of his pack would pass the great saurian that held the narrow way. He waited eagerly, anxiously, wondering whether young Frank, the impetuous leader of the pack and the swiftest trailer, would see the danger in time or rush headlong to destruction.

Frank was well in the lead. His resonant voice, the clearest and mellowest in that woodland choir which made, to Sandy Jim's ears, the sweetest music ever heard by man, boomed out behind the last of the myrtles. Another quarter minute would decide his fate. Just clear of the bushes, a log lay across the dike. As the big black and white speckled hound hurdled it, his eyes lit upon the monstrous incredible thing in the path ahead of him—an appalling dragonlike bulk, reared upward on short, thick forelegs, the long armored body almost hidden from the hound's view by cavernous, tusk-studded, hugely yawning jaws.

A piercing half-human yell burst from the dog. He had seen the danger too late to check his next leap. Seemingly he was doomed. Yet terror gave him strength. Twisting his body in the air, the hound landed sideways and rolled and slid to the very brink of death. The giant gator, his gross body lurching horribly, launched himself forward; but long ago his weight had grown too great for his legs to uphold him and his rush fell short. A scant

ten inches from the scrambling dog, the mighty jaws snapped together with a hiss. Next moment, Frank, whimpering pitifully, every hair erect, had gained his feet and jumped clear of the danger zone.

Sandy Jim Mayfield breathed a deep sigh of relief. For an instant he had believed that he had sacrificed his best dog and he had bitterly cursed his own folly. But there was no time to waste. The rest of the pack—five gaunt hounds and a big brown shaggy beast, half hound, half Airedale, the killer of the crew—had reached the scene. Apprised of danger by Frank's howls and whines, they had looked before they leaped and none had come within reach of those gigantic jaws which could crush their bones like reed stems.

Sandy Jim knew that his chance had come. The king of the river, famished from his winter fast, his prey almost within his reach, heaved his massive body upward once more and tried another waddling rush. He had eyes for nothing except those dogs, the meat that a gator loves best; and Sandy Jim, crouching low, his rifle close to his hand, eased the punt out from behind the willow. Slowly and soundlessly he paddled, at first heading parallel with the dike, then, when the rushes hid him from the saurian's view, turning straight toward the bank. Along the edge of the water growth he pushed the boat inch by inch, screened by the tall green rushes,

and at last he laid down the paddle and reached cautiously for his rifle.

Mayfield smiled happily as he drew his bead. Not for worlds would he have missed the drama which he had witnessed; and not for worlds would he have let the flat-horned buck be killed at that season when his undeveloped antlers were scarcely worth having. The old woodsman would have a memorable tale to tell of how the river king had saved the great stag and thus had paid a debt which he owed. For a moment, as he gazed along the rifle barrel, Mayfield was tempted to shoot a little high.

The thought passed as quickly as it had come. The smile faded. The thin sun-tanned face pressed against the rifle stock was fierce and keen like that of a hunting hawk. The eager hounds leaped and bayed as the rifle cracked.

An hour later, Sandy Jim, approaching his house from the rear, walked up to the kitchen door. He had not seen his sons. He had sent the dogs back along the dike, and rather than swim the break, the hunters had ridden on with the pack toward the big swamp to try another drive. Mayfield slouched into the kitchen, where Gabe, the negro boy who cooked for him, was prodding the wood fire in the stove.

The old hunter explored the oven and found a square of hot cornbread.

“The flat-horned buck’s come back,” he drawled. “We’ll get him this fall when his horns are prime.”

He dropped into a chair and began to unlace his boots.

“I jes’ killed that big gator they call the king of the river,” he said casually. “We’ll go down to the backwater after dinner an’ take off his hide.”

The Prisoners of Half-Acre



THE PRISONERS OF HALF-ACRE

TIDE would be high at Little Inlet an hour after sunrise. Shortly before dawn Jen Murray walked from his cabin at the edge of the marshes to the creek landing where he kept his boat. On his shoulder rested a rusty single-barreled shotgun. In his right hand he carried a surf line neatly coiled and a battered bait bucket half full of six-inch mullet. He walked briskly, because the November air was cold.

Jen welcomed that bite in the air. Among the dusky marshmen of the Low Country few could read more skillfully the signs pertaining to fish and ducks. This, to Jen's way of thinking, would be a perfect morning—chill and gray, with a rising tide sweeping on to high flood and a light offshore wind from the north. The combination was excellent. There would be bass in the surf at Little Inlet; the bluebill flocks would be winging in from the sea to the rivers and creeks of the marshlands; though the season was early, he might even find a few squadrons of black mallards.

The flooding tide lapped about the worm-eaten posts of the landing. Jen's square-headed, flat-

bottomed bateau, tied to the outermost piling, was already afloat. With a grunt of satisfaction the marshman lowered his light wiry body into the boat, leaned the gun against a thwart where he could reach it in an instant, picked up his heavy homemade oars and began the long row down the winding march creek which would bring him to the back beach of the barrier island between the marshes and the sea.

Another fisherman was astir early that morning, and another hunter. Ten minutes after Jen's bateau had vanished in the gloom, a great blue heron, standing hump-backed and motionless on a limb of a water oak a hundred yards from the landing, suddenly straightened his slim body, craned his sinuous neck and launched into the air on wide, slow-beating pinions. Almost at the same moment a large black lump at the top of a tall dead pine fifty yards beyond the heron's oak came suddenly to life and assumed the shape of a bulky, dark-bodied, white-headed bird—a male bald eagle.

The eagle's keen ears had caught the swish of the heron's wings and the faint sound had awakened him. He saw the shadowy form of the heron sweeping past, and having thus explained the slight noise which had disturbed him, he lost all interest in the matter, and after stretching first one wing and then the other, set about preening his feathers

with his strong, hooked, yellow bill. For perhaps a quarter of an hour he devoted himself to his toilet, while the dawn brightened round him. Then he, too, spread his dark pinions and began the active business of the day.

Jen, halfway to Little Inlet now, saw a great blue heron winging with measured strokes across the marshes to his left. He paid no attention to the bird, for it was only one of many herons inhabiting the marshes, though this one seemed larger than most. Just before landing on the back beach of the barrier island, the marshman saw a bald eagle circling high in the air. To Jen the king of birds was a familiar spectacle. Eager to cast his bass line into the surf beside the inlet's mouth while the flood tide was still running fast, he gave the soaring bird scarcely a second glance.

Scanning the sunlit eastern horizon in search of bluebill flocks coming in from the ocean to the sheltered waters behind, he walked briskly across the sandy flats toward the front beach. When, about an hour and a half later, he returned to the boat, he did not know that the eagle was still circling almost directly overhead, but much higher, so high that it was now a mere spot against the pale-blue dome of the sky.

The marshman plodded across the soft sands toward the bateau, his gun across his shoulder, three

spotted-tailed surf bass from four to eight pounds in weight trailing by a cord from his left hand. Suddenly he halted. A quick glance behind had shown him a small black speck still far away over the ocean, a black speck which grew swiftly larger. Instantly he crouched close to the sand, then crawled hurriedly to a tuft of grass ten feet to his left. There he waited, his gun ready, his eyes fixed on the lone duck rushing straight toward him at the speed for which the bluebill is famous.

Other eyes marked that oncoming speck. The soaring eagle, though almost invisible from the ground, could see both duck and hunter with a distinctness which revealed nearly every detail; but for a time the eagle paid little attention to either, because he did not realize that far below there was about to be enacted a little drama from which he might profit. Not until smoke leaped from the muzzle of Jen's gun and the duck swerved sharply and seemed for a fraction of a second to stagger in the air did the eagle betray the slightest interest in what was taking place a thousand feet beneath him.

Then, however, he became in an instant a thing of amazing and almost terrible energy. His yellow eyes, under their frowning white brows, glared as though fire burned behind them; his powerful feet, armed with curved blue-black talons, opened and closed, opened again, then clenched more tightly

than ever; his hooked beak gaped momentarily as his harsh, fierce challenge rang unheard through the solitude around him. Next moment he was shooting at terrific speed down a long steep incline, his wings half closed, his tail half spread, his head and neck thrust forward so that his body was like a great arrowhead cleaving the air.

The duck, mortally wounded yet even in its dying moments strong of wing, had passed a hundred yards beyond the marshman before it fell. Jen, grumbling a little because it had fallen not on the sands, where he could have recovered it more easily, but into the water beyond a fringe of marsh, was in the act of picking up his bass when a swift shadow sped across the sand close by him.

Instinctively he glanced upward, then dropped his fish and ran toward the marsh, breeching his gun as he ran and fumbling in his pocket for another cartridge. He found it and jammed the gun shut just as the eagle, abruptly checking his descent, hung for a moment twenty feet above the spot where the duck had fallen, then dropped out of sight behind the tall salt grass.

The big bird remained invisible for perhaps ten seconds. When he rose, the dead bluebill clutched in his talons, Jen threw the gun to his shoulder and fired. For some moments the marshman stood peering along the barrel; then he cursed with all the

vehemence at his command. Above the marshes the eagle flapped steadily onward, still holding his booty, his wide wings beating swiftly and strongly. Jen turned and plodded back through the mushy sands toward the spot where he had left his three bass. Just before stooping to pick them up, he breeched his gun, threw out the empty shell, inserted a new one and closed the weapon with a vicious snap which was an accurate indication of his temper.

His humor did not improve during the long row homeward. The morning had proved bitterly disappointing. True, he had three bass; but he should have had half a dozen. The flocks of bluebills from which he had expected to glean a few victims had not materialized—perhaps because the sky, instead of remaining overcast, had cleared just after sunrise. Finally the one duck that he had shot down had been stolen from him.

Jen grumbled and swore as he tugged at the heavy oars. His small eyes scanned the marshes and the sky as he rowed, seeking a victim, some living thing upon which to vent his disappointment. Eagerly he watched the gulls winging slowly above the marsh tideways. Once he snatched up the gun just too late to draw a bead on a yellowlegs which flew over him, sounding its mellow whistle and flashing its white rump. With a splashing of

webbed feet in water, a loon rose just around a bend of the creek, and Jen, reaching hastily for the gun, barked his knuckle against a tholepin. He was still sucking the bloody finger when a tall gray-blue bird, which had evidently taken alarm at the loon's hurried flight, flapped upward out of a small gully behind a peninsula of salt grass.

It was a long shot for one of Jen's cheap black-powder shells, but the great blue heron, even larger than most of its kind, was a tempting target. The marshman jerked the gun to his shoulder, aimed carefully and fired. The heron collapsed in the air and, whirling round and round, fell into the marsh a hundred feet from the edge of the creek. Jen picked up his oars and continued his journey, his mood somewhat less savage than before. He would have been better pleased if he had killed the big bird outright; but there was satisfaction in the thought that he had smashed its wing and brought it down crippled and helpless to become prey for the marshland minks.

Jen's temper would have been still further improved if he could have seen at that moment the result of the shot which he had fired perhaps a half hour before—the shot fired at the bald eagle which had robbed him of his duck. He had not missed

as he supposed. One duck shot had struck the eagle's body near the base of the right wing. It must have pierced or torn some muscle or tendon essential for the operation of that wing; for, although for some minutes the great bird had continued to drive forward and upward with strong steady strokes, each wing beat brought a stab of pain which rapidly became intolerable. Had Jen followed the eagle's flight a few moments longer he would have seen the bird waver in the air before it had flown a mile, then turn and sail with set, rigid wings down to a small hummock in the marsh known as Half-Acre Island.

Tall large-leaved weeds, yellow and drooping now that summer had passed, interspersed with tufts of stiff-stemmed, gray-green grass, covered the hummock's surface. Here and there stood small dense clumps of evergreen cassena bushes, salt-water myrtles and sword-bladed, needle-pointed yuccas. Near the middle of the little island an ancient live oak, stunted but vigorous and green, cast a shade so dense that neither weeds nor grass grew within the circle of its branches. In the cassenas a small colony of Louisiana herons had reared their young. Their abandoned platforms of sticks were scattered everywhere through the evergreen thickets, which supported also the deserted homes of scores of boat-tailed grackles. In spring and early summer the

hummock had been a populous bird city clamorous with the cries of nestlings, alive with the quiver of wings. But now, as the wounded eagle planed toward it on pinions which seemed to have lost the power of movement, he detected no sign of life on the hummock, no stirring among the thickets, no sound of beast or of bird.

The silence and stillness of the place reassured him. He knew that he was in trouble and he would have sought a more remote retreat if that had been possible; but he had turned toward Half-Acre Island because his wings would bear him no farther and he must land there or fall into the open marsh. Perhaps it was some deep-seated instinct, perhaps it was mere chance which caused him, wounded though he was, to retain his hold upon the duck; but the added weight of this burden pulled him lower and lower as he neared the hummock so that he could not land in the live oak as he had intended, but came to rest on the ground close to the island's muddy shore. He stood for some moments on the duck's body, looking about him and listening. Then suddenly he turned his head, faced quickly about and crouched with half-opened wings, his bright eyes glaring defiance under their frowning brows.

Creeping toward him through the grass, inch by inch, foot by foot, a female gray fox dragged her

body forward. Already she had crept within leaping distance of the eagle; and the big bird, conscious of his inability to use his pinions, stiffened his muscles for the onset. But the sudden assault which he expected did not come. The fox, perceiving that she had been discovered, abandoned her effort to approach unseen. But she did not leap to the attack; she did not circle the eagle swiftly and lightly to get within his guard and frighten him into abandoning his prey. She advanced more rapidly than before; but it was a slow, pitiful advance, painful and laborious; for behind her, as she dragged herself onward, her hind legs trailed limp and useless.

The paths of the bald eagle and the gray fox do not cross. They inhabit separate kingdoms: the eagle, the kingdom of the air, the marshes, the lonely sea-island beaches; the fox, the kingdom of the woods, the thicket-grown broom-grass fields, the moss-curtained swamps. Never before had this fox of Half-Acre Island attacked an eagle, nor would she have done so single-handed under ordinary circumstances. Never before had the wounded eagle which had sought Half-Acre as a refuge found himself confronted by an enemy like the one that faced him now. His was the bolder, more arrogant spirit; his, too, perhaps, the more formidable armament. But in this encounter the decisive factor was the

crippled fox's gnawing insistent hunger—hunger so terrible that to assuage it she would have faced almost any odds.

Two weeks before, at the edge of a broom-grass field on the mainland, a charge of turkey shot from Jen Murray's gun had ripped the muscles of her back above the haunches. Hard pressed by Jen's dog, she had been forced to take to the salt marshes and plunge into a marsh creek. In the ice-cold water the torn muscles of her back had stiffened suddenly and her hind legs had grown numb. She had become almost helpless, and the ebbing tide had carried her downstream far out into the marshlands. The creek swung close to Half-Acre Island, and by a desperate effort she had dragged herself out of the water and had reached the hummock.

There she had eked out a precarious existence, a prisoner on Half-Acre, because, with her hind legs useless to her, she could not cross the surrounding waste of boggy, treacherous marsh. Crippled though she was, she had managed to find food from time to time, while a small sink-hole near the island's center, deepened some years previously by plume hunters who had camped on the hummock, provided enough water to relieve her thirst. But the problem of existence had grown more and more difficult. She had fasted for nearly two days when she saw a great white-headed bird sail in from the

marshes, bearing a duck in its claws; and the scent of that duck in her nostrils filled her with sudden frenzy which counted no cost.

There was no similar compelling motive to inflame the eagle's spirit. He was not particularly hungry. Wounded and in pain from his wound, aware that his wings were useless to him, apprehensive of other enemies in the thickets surrounding him, he struck once with his long curved claws at the fox's head as it came within reach, then hopped awkwardly sideways and backward, retreating, but keeping his face to his foe. One claw raked the fox's nose and drew blood; but, insensible to the pain, she seized the duck in her jaws, crunched it, tore it and devoured it on the spot, paying no further attention to the big bird which she had driven from his prey.

The eagle did not wait for her to finish her meal. Walking awkwardly through the grass, he made his way around the island's shore, keeping as far as possible from the thickets. On the other side of the hummock the grass and weeds were less dense, the cassena clumps more widely separated. Presently he turned inland for perhaps a dozen yards to the foot of a small dead cedar half uprooted by a gale, clambered up its stout slanting stem and, passing with some difficulty from branch to branch, took his stand at the top of the little tree perhaps fifteen

feet above the ground. There he remained throughout the rest of the day, and there night found him.

Another cripple came to Half-Acre Island that evening—another victim of Jen Murray's gun. The great blue heron which Jen had shot down had fallen perhaps three-quarters of a mile from the hummock. His left wing was shattered; it dangled useless and limp. But no shot had entered the heron's body, and he had no sooner struck ground than he was on his feet, striding swiftly up the muddy bed of the small gully into which he had fallen.

All day he wandered about the marshes or rested beside the little pools and rivulets left by the tide, in dreadful pain yet rousing himself now and then—for the heron is a voracious feeder—to catch a mullet or shrimp in the teeming shallows. Toward evening, when the throbbing of his broken wing had begun to pass into a sort of numbness, he fished for a while at the mouth of a small marsh brook emptying into a larger creek not more than two hundred yards from Half-Acre Island. His appetite satisfied, he bethought himself of a roosting place for the night. Near at hand he saw the lone live oak on Half-Acre and, following the bank of the creek which led in that direction, he soon reached the

hummock. He could not get up into the oak; but by utilizing his bill and his long muscular neck, as well as his feet, he managed to clamber to the top of a cassena bush, where he would be safer than on the ground. On this perch he passed the night, unmolested by any foe.

So it happened that by an odd whim of fate three victims of Jen Murray's gun were gathered at the same time on a little hummock in the marshes—three wild creatures of widely different kinds, each rendered partly helpless by the marshman's powder and shot. To these three prisoners of Half-Acre the next few days brought varied fortunes. For the heron life grew somewhat brighter. His wing was smashed beyond repair; he would never fly again. But after that first day the pain which he suffered was comparatively slight; and he was a prisoner in only a limited sense, for he could roam widely over the marshes on his long legs.

His field of activity was greatly circumscribed, since, instead of flying from one fishing ground to another, he had to walk; but at that season, when all the tideways teemed with life, the fruits of the summer's increase, the heron did not have to travel far in order to find abundant food. He spent his days on the marshes surrounding the little island, fishing in the creeks and gullies for mullet and shrimp; but whereas before his wing was broken

he frequently continued his fishing long after dark, and on moonlight nights was often as active as in the day, he now abandoned night fishing altogether and invariably returned to the hummock before evening. There were dangers of the dark which he did not care to face crippled as he was, and always the going down of the sun was his signal for retirement to his safe perch in the top of the cassena thicket.

To the gray fox, on the other hand, the darkness which followed swiftly upon the gorgeous autumn sunsets frequently brought a revival of activity and energy, perhaps a renewal of hope. Always the night had been her friend and ally. It was then that she had tasted the keenest joys of living; it was then that the world in which she had lived became her world, hers to be enjoyed to the utmost in freedom and easy security from the dangers which abounded by day but vanished with the shutting down of the dark.

That freedom was hers no longer. Her useless hind limbs chained her to the hummock and she now sought food by day as well as by night, since the problem of getting enough to eat was so desperately difficult that it required all her time except brief intervals spent in sleeping. Yet when the darkness spread across the marshes and enveloped Half-Acre like a cloud, new strength seemed to come to her,

her faculties grew keener, the weariness and numbness of her spirit in large measure passed away.

Most of what little food she found was found at night. Small as the island was, it was considerably larger than its name implied and it supported a surprisingly numerous population of marsh rats whose shallow burrows still contained young. The fox, an old hand at digging out these burrows, subsisted largely on their inhabitants until she had depleted the supply. Occasionally she captured an adult rat by lying perfectly still, as though asleep, and crushing the animal with a sudden blow of her paw; and once in this same manner she had the good luck to kill a mink which was so much absorbed in following a trail that it failed to see her.

Insects grubbed out of the mold and little fiddler crabs captured along the muddy edges of the hummock helped to allay the cravings of her stomach. Some slight nourishment, too, was provided by long, slender green snakes and rather thick-bodied glass snakes, which had a queer habit of breaking themselves in two when her forepaw descended upon them. The supply of these was soon exhausted, however, and but for the coming of a series of abnormally high tides she must have starved before the arrival of the eagle and the heron which now shared her captivity on Half-Acre.

The marshes at that season abounded with clap-

per rails. When the rising waters flooded the low-lying grass plains and bathed the margins of the hummock itself they not only brought many big blue crabs, which the fox soon learned to capture and eat with relish, but they also drove scores of rails from the submerged marshes to the hummock's shore. These noisy, rather stupid birds had little knowledge of any four-footed enemy except the mink. They moved about freely and boldly, although they were at a disadvantage in the darkness; and night after night the crippled fox, crouching motionless in the tall weeds close to the island's margin, dined on rail which had almost walked into her jaws.

But with the waning of the moon the tides went back to normal, filling the marsh creeks and rivulets, but no longer spreading across the grassy flats. Only rarely was the fox able to capture an unwary rail; the big crabs came no more; the marsh-rat burrows had nearly all been emptied of young; the scanty reptilian population of the hummock had ceased to exist. The blackbirds, grackles and fish crows, which often visited the place, were too wary to be captured. The fox was hungrier than she had ever been before when chance and her own desperation put her in possession of the bluebill duck which the wounded eagle had brought to the hummock in his claws.

This was the best meal that she had enjoyed since becoming a prisoner on Half-Acre, and it gave her new energy and strength. Her torn muscles were healing, though her hind legs were as yet incapable of bearing her weight; and that night she contrived to capture another rail. The following day, too, brought a stroke of good fortune in the shape of a full-grown rat so badly wounded by another of its combative race that it could hardly move; and some hours later she managed to ambush a wandering marsh rabbit. For a while the gray fox, except that her hind legs were still pitifully weak and stiff, was almost herself again, still hungry, but no longer mad with hunger—a cool, keen, careful schemer, sharper of wit than any other wild thing of the woods.

It was then that her wits, endowed once more with all their native cunning, began to plan the destruction of the other captives of Half-Acre, the wounded eagle and the wing-broken heron which were her fellow prisoners on the hummock and which would help to keep her alive if she could contrive to kill them.

The heron's plight she understood the moment she saw the bird. His left wing, matted with mud, dangled at his side; and she knew that he could not fly, though he could walk on his long legs much faster than she could drag her maimed body. But

for a time the eagle puzzled her. At first she paid no attention to him; but suddenly it dawned on her that he never stirred from his perch in the dead cedar sapling, that he had remained there all of one day and part of the next without spreading his wings.

She kept close watch on him during the rest of the second day and never once saw him move; and it may be that she knew then—for a fox's cunning is much more than instinct—that he, too, had lost the use of his wings and was a prisoner on Half-Acre. She realized, at any rate, that all was not well with the big white-headed bird standing stern and immovable in the dead cedar, watching the marshes and the sky with piercing yellow eyes which seemed always to be fixed on something infinitely far away.

With long, grim, confident patience the gray fox bided her time. Somehow she seemed to understand that a moment would come when the great bird in the dead cedar must topple from his perch.

If the eagle also had foreknowledge of that moment it was with a sort of regal resignation, a kingly fatalism that he awaited its coming. He was at once the most fortunate and the least fortunate of the prisoners of Half-Acre. His injury was

slight and would heal completely if he could keep himself alive in the meantime. But his broad pinions, which had never failed him before, were utterly useless now; and those pinions were essential to his life, an indispensable part of his hunting equipment. Without their aid he could not catch food; and although, like most birds of prey, he could endure sustained fasting, he must find sustenance sooner or later, or perish.

The heron, whose wings were not necessary for his fishing, was in no danger of starvation. The unfailing bounty of the marsh creeks would support him indefinitely. The fox's lot was harder. Yet she, too, could struggle against the fate that threatened her; she could fight with what weapons she still possessed to keep life in her body until she could use her legs again. But the eagle, so long as his wings were paralyzed, was utterly impotent; and from the first he seemed to comprehend the fact and to accept it grimly as one against which it was useless to contend.

Those piercing eyes looked always into the hazy distances and seemed to take no account of things near at hand. Their gaze rested on the white clouds which had been the eagle's companions on calm, windless mornings when he swung round and round on motionless wings in the high air, taking his ease in the upper solitudes where he had reigned. They

swept the wide expanses of the marshlands, golden brown now that autumn had come—vast plains of tall salt grasses watered by numberless winding creeks and tideways and filling all the broad spaces between the narrow barrier islands along the sea's edge and the mainland behind.

Hour after hour he followed with his eyes the comings and goings of the feathered peoples of the marshes—the big blue herons moving with stately deliberate wing beats; the long-tailed marsh harriers quartering the grassy plains; the ospreys circling and poising above the creeks, then plunging like feathered spearheads upon the fish which they had spied from above; the white crimson-billed terns winnowing the air, swooping and swerving with the grace of swallows, darting down at intervals with lightninglike swiftness upon their prey.

With a strange absorption, which must have had some deeper source than the cravings of appetite, the wounded eagle watched the wild duck hosts come in from the sea. Although in fall and winter, bluebill and mallard, teal and widgeon had formed part of his diet, fish had been his staple food. Yet always in the late afternoons he awaited with undiminished eagerness the coming of the fast-flying feathered regiments.

He saw them first, far away over the ocean be-

yond the barrier islands, as long faint streaks like wisps of smoke above the horizon, or else as dim gray clouds which moved and shifted and changed, darkening as they drew nearer and presently thinning out into black lines or irregular wedges shooting across the sky. Some of the smaller flocks passed near at hand, coming in above Little Inlet and flying comparatively low. But the larger flocks, many of them containing hundreds of ducks, passed for the most part farther to the southwest, where a river came down from the rice lands to the ocean. These were not bluebills, but mallards heading for the old ricefields and fresh-water marshes a few miles back from the coast; and as the days passed their numbers increased, so that sometimes toward sunset the eagle, gazing into the dim distance, could see thousands of them at the same moment as the long armies winged inland high in the air like trailers of cloud against the glowing sky.

His eyes fixed on these far-off things, his thoughts ranging the air and the marshes miles distant from the hummock which was his prison, the eagle may have remained for a long while unaware of the watcher waiting for him to die. Yet a time came when he saw the fox, and it may be that he understood somehow the significance of her vigil. At any rate, after some days had passed, the fox noted for the first time that the big bird was watching her

from his perch, calmly, coolly, yet with a certain fierceness gleaming in his yellow eyes.

Probably she did not understand clearly the meaning of that intent, steady gaze. She had had no experience with eagles and it did not occur to her to regard this one as a possible menace; yet the chances are that the eagle was now watching her for the same grim reason which had caused her to watch him—that the hunger which had begun to torture him was focusing his thoughts upon her as a possible source of food.

She was the one living thing that ever came within his reach, spending a part of each day lying half hidden in the grass not more than thirty feet from his perch. The habit of a lifetime was strong in him. Every morning before dawn he preened his feathers and went through his regular stretching exercises; and whereas at first he could not move his wings without acute pain, the injured muscle had now so far healed that he could open his pinions to more than half their accustomed spread. He knew that he was not yet able to fly, that he could not flap his wings strongly or ascend into the air. But he could easily glide down to where the fox lay and land squarely upon her; and more and more intently, as his hunger sharpened, he watched her lying there; more and more definite became the

prompting to launch himself forward and downward.

The fox, though she watched the eagle closely, seldom remained long in her grassy bed near his perch. Except when sleeping, she was generally moving about in her search for food, and she was able to carry on this search somewhat more actively because her hind legs, though very far from normal, were no longer totally useless to her. Her increased mobility offset to a certain extent the inroads which she had made upon the food resources of the hummock. Food was scarcer, but she could seek it more effectively; and though seldom free from the pinch of hunger, she found enough sustenance to keep going. She never forgot the eagle, but her war against him was a waiting game in which she could do nothing but wait. Against the other prisoner of Half-Acre she could proceed more vigorously.

Again and again she tried to capture the wing-broken blue heron. She knew the tall bird's habits well; knew that each morning well after daylight he came down from his safe perch in the cassena, strode across the hummock and disappeared in the marshes, and that each afternoon well before dark he returned. Three times she tried to ambush him, lying concealed in the grass or weeds near the hummock's edge; but each time the heron chose another route. One afternoon she hid herself near the foot

of his cassena, but the heron saw her in time and spent the night in another bush. Mere chance gave her the opportunity which she had so often sought vainly.

She was lying half asleep, about an hour before sunset, in her bed near the eagle's cedar. Suddenly the heron, returning to his perch earlier than usual and striding through the high grass with less than his accustomed caution, stepped almost upon her. In an instant her jaws clamped upon his long leg just above the toes.

With a hoarse cry the heron sprang upward, his uninjured wing beating the air and buffeting the fox's head. But those long, strong jaws held fast, crunched tighter and tighter on the black slender leg, then with a sudden effort crushed the bone. The eagle, watching from his perch, his yellow eyes glowing more fiercely than ever now, saw the fox lurch awkwardly forward, striking with her forepaw to beat the big blue-gray bird to the ground. He saw the heron, forced backward so that he was half standing, half sitting, stab fiercely again and again at the fox's face with his bill, his long neck thrusting like a striking snake, his straight, javelin-like beak darting in and out, in and out with trip-hammer swiftness.

The eagle's head dropped lower; his wide dark wings unfolded. A moment he poised on his perch.

Then, with a scream, he planed swiftly down through the air, his talons spread, his hooked bill partly open. Already he seemed to taste the life-giving meat that he craved. Coming from above and behind, he would strike the fox just forward of the shoulders and sink his long claws into her nape.

By a tenth of a second he was too late to strike the spot at which he aimed. The fox, her hind-quarters too stiff and weak to permit of swift manœuvring, had been compelled to take her punishment. She lay on her chest, her jaws clamped on the heron's leg, one furry forepaw raised as a shield against the tall bird's blows. But that slim foreleg was an ineffectual buckler. She could not parry the darting snakelike thrusts that followed one another with frenzied rapidity. Before the fight had lasted twenty seconds the heron's long sharp-pointed bill had stabbed her in half a dozen places. Yet these wounds, though most of them were in the face, were comparatively slight; and in spite of the blinding blood and stinging pain, she kept her grip on the heron's leg, striving meantime to force her body forward upon her captive.

Then, a fraction of a moment before the eagle struck his quarry, the heron's javelin found the mark it had been seeking. Driven with all the force of that sinewy neck, the needle point of the heavy

tapering bill, fully seven inches in length, pierced the fox's right eye, penetrated deep into the cavity behind it and remained there, too tightly wedged to be withdrawn.

The fox shivered, writhed, twisted over on her flank; and the eagle, falling upon her at that instant, struck her, not upon the nape but upon the side of her neck, so that the curved claws of one of his powerful feet were buried in her throat. The big bird's weight held her down. She struggled desperately, but crippled as she was, she could not rise; and meanwhile, with the fury of famine, the eagle plied beak and talons.

Toward the last, when the fox had ceased struggling, the eagle, as though suddenly reminded of the presence of another victim whose body would provide food, reached out with one great clawed foot and, grasping the heron's neck just behind the head, at one wrench tore out the tall bird's life.

There was meat enough then for one of the prisoners of Half-Acre, meat enough to keep him for many days; and before those days had passed the torn tendon of his wing would have healed and he would be free again.

Five nights later a brisk northeaster set in. Tide was at high flood shortly after sunrise; and Jen

Murray, rising with the sun, looked out of the one window of his hut and observed with satisfaction that the water was well up in the marshes so that only the tips of the tall grasses showed above the surface. It was a perfect morning for rail shooting—the kind of morning when he could kill two or three dozen marsh hens, as he called them, before the tide dropped. The law forbade the selling of game birds, but Jen had never been a stickler for the law. In fall and early winter the marketing of clapper rails was one of his regular sources of income.

Poling his light bateau across the flooded flats, within an hour he had bagged twenty birds. Some he shot in the water as they swam from one raft of floating sedge to another; others he knocked over in the air as they rose in slow, fluttering flight before his boat. Then, though the water was still high, there came a lull in the shooting. Jen, finding no more birds in the open, turned his punt toward Half-Acre Island. Always when the big tides came many rail took refuge on that little hummock in the midst of the marshes. A walk around its edge should net Jen a dozen or more.

The marshman poled to the hummock and stepped ashore, holding his gun ready. Slowly he worked his way around the island's margin, knee-deep in the tall grasses and weeds. A rail flushed

well ahead of him, but Jen, his finger on the trigger, judged the distance to be too great. Suddenly, as he rounded a low clump of myrtles close to the island's edge, he jerked the gun to his shoulder. A great, dark-bodied, white-headed bird had launched itself out of a small dead cedar, a magnificent bald eagle.

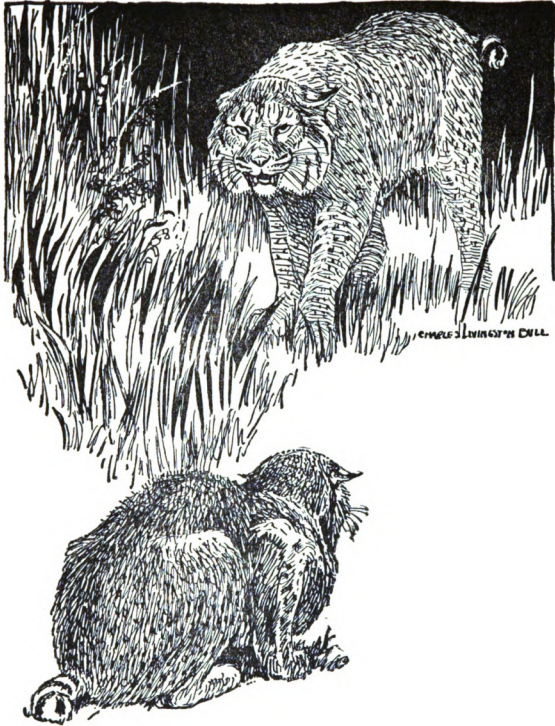
Even as he aimed the marshman noted a strange clumsiness in the eagle's flight, a slowness of wing beats, a certain heaviness, an appearance of labored effort, as though the big bird's pinions were scarcely equal to their task. The range was short; Jen, remembering that his shot were small, aimed for the head. The eagle dropped like a stone.

Jen turned away from the marshy rim of the hummock and strode through the grass and dead weeds toward the spot where the bird had fallen. Something in the grass a little to his right attracted his attention. For several minutes he studied the objects that he found there—the mangled carcass of a female gray fox and, close by it, the carcass of a great blue heron.

In the cold weather the bodies had suffered comparatively little change. Plainly the eagle had been feeding on them and had kept the vultures off; but Jen found two questions which puzzled him: How came this fox and this heron to be lying side by side

in the grass? And what was a gray fox doing on that little hummock in the marsh?

He turned away presently and dismissed these problems as of no practical importance. Before resuming his hunt for more marsh hens, he found the eagle's carcass and cut off the great dark-brown wings. There was a girl on a neighboring plantation who wanted a hawk-wing fan, and it occurred to him that these eagle pinions would please her. Later, however, he threw them into the mud, deciding that they were too troublesome to carry.



Lynx Lucifer

LYNX LUCIFER

FROM time to time during the night there had been both sound and movement in the wood; but now, in the grayness of the November dawn, there was not even the flutter or the rustle of a leaf. The watcher behind the big pine log shivered. This, and not midnight, was the hour for ghosts and goblins in the swamp country—this pallid unearthly interval when the wild creatures of the night seemed to have withdrawn to their secret refuges and the wild creatures of the day had not yet ventured forth from their retreats. The lone watcher, long unused to the grim witchery of utter solitude, strained to catch the first reassuring sound which would announce the awakening of the daytime folk of the woods and prove that all life had not suddenly and mysteriously perished.

At last this sound came—a sharp metallic note from some small throat, slitting the silence like a miniature javelin. The watcher turned his head. Across the little glade at the edge of which his pine log lay, a narrow trail, hedged on each side by a dense growth of young pines, opened into the clearing. He had selected his station behind the log so

that he could watch this trail, knowing that it would be a thoroughfare for all who happened to pass that way in the moonlight, and his good judgment had been rewarded.

Since midnight, when he had gone on watch, three glimpses of woods wild folk had been vouchsafed him. He had scarcely settled himself behind the log when a big buck with widely arching antlers walked slowly along the trail, leaped the dry bed of the little stream which before the summer drought had wound through the glade, and passed on without pause into the woods some twenty feet to windward of the watcher. An hour later a raccoon ambled by, taking the same course which the buck had followed; and not long before daylight the watcher suddenly realized that a doe had come from nowhere and was standing motionless in the glade, a shadowy, impalpable figure the outlines of which he could barely distinguish. Presently the doe vanished as mysteriously as she had appeared, and thenceforward the patient watcher saw no living thing, though now and again his ears told him that smaller wild folk, invisible in that faint light, were passing at intervals. With the approach of dawn even these infinitesimal noises ceased, and for half an hour or more the silence was absolute until that first sharp, small, metallic voice for the morning punctured it with startling suddenness.

The sound came from across the glade, where the trail through the pine thicket opened. The watcher recognized the voice as that of a water thrush, and presently in the brightening light he saw the bird walking about on the ground with quick steps and an incessant seesaw motion of its tail, searching for insects amid the brown pine needles. He watched it with the keen interest that he felt in all living things, large or small, wondering whether it had come to the glade expecting to find the little stream which had rippled through the place before the drought. The stream's bed was now dry sand; but on the previous evening a brief shower had fallen; and on the other side of the glade, near the edge of a small canebrake, there was one low spot still moist. To this spot the water thrush soon found its way; and there fate descended upon it.

From the edge of the canebrake a tawny beast shot out into the open. With a startled cry the water thrush took wing, but a widespread paw, bristling with curved needle-pointed claws, caught it in mid-air and bore it lifeless to the ground. For a moment the lynx crouched motionless, one furry forefoot planted upon his victim, his pale eyes searching the shadows around the edges of the glade to make sure that no enemy had witnessed his leap from the shelter of the canes. Then, taking the bird in his mouth, he crossed the glade in three

bounds, making for the opening of the trail which led away through the pine thicket.

A low growl halted him. The watcher behind the pine log saw a strange sight, a sight which by itself was ample reward for his long vigil. At the entrance of the trail crouched another lynx, much larger than the first, his back arched, his glassy eyes glinting with a greenish light, his teeth bared in a menacing snarl. There was no mistaking the hostile purpose of this unlooked-for intruder, and he allowed no time for speculation. Hair bristling, white fangs gleaming, he stalked stiffly towards his smaller antagonist; then, as the latter backed away still holding the bird in his jaws, the big lynx launched himself forward in a long bound of almost incredible swiftness.

The struggle was far less noisy than the eager watcher behind the pine log had supposed that a fight between lynxes would be. Deep-throated savage snarls, now and again a low, mournful, repressed whine as fang or claw ripped through fur and hide to the white flesh underneath—these were the only sounds, and they would have been inaudible to a man if one had happened to pass twenty yards from the spot. Even in the fury of combat the instinct which renders the bay lynx the most silent and most mysterious inhabitant of the swamp woods kept its grip upon the two big cats.

Yet they were too much absorbed in their struggle to note that from behind the pine log the form of their most dreaded enemy had reared itself into full view—the form of a man, or rather a slim, tall, black-haired boy of seventeen or eighteen years, clad in the brown shirt and corduroys of a woodsman, leaning forward over the log the better to view the battle.

The boy knew that rival male lynxes sometimes fought fierce duels in the woods, but he had never witnessed one of these combats, and he watched this one with breathless interest. The flying leap of the larger lynx had overborne his opponent, and during the first few seconds of the fight the big lynx was on top, his body completely hiding that of his foe. Almost immediately, however, this condition was reversed. The action was so swift that the boy could not follow it in detail, for the combatants were a squirming, writhing, revolving mass, and, locked as they were in close embrace, they were indistinguishable from each other. Presently this revolving motion ceased and the boy saw that the smaller lynx was uppermost, its fangs apparently buried in the throat of its adversary. He concluded that for once pluck and skill had triumphed over size and weight, but in an instant he realized his mistake.

The hind legs of the larger lynx were working

like steam piston rods and his claws were tearing his enemy to ribbons, while with his forepaws and teeth he held his antagonist almost immovable. Evidently in lynx warfare the victor was he who kept his own shoulders pinned to the mat and fought upward from below, ripping and slashing with the ten sharp sheath knives with which his long muscular hind legs were equipped, knives which sooner or later would lay bare his foe's vitals. In a flash the boy saw that unless the smaller lynx could break away from that fatal embrace there could be but one ending. Moved by a sudden impulse of pity, he mounted the log with a shout and instantly the combatants flew apart, the smaller lynx shooting backward into the pine thicket, catapulted to safety by those same powerful hind legs of his enemy which a moment before had been ripping the life out of him.

The boy never saw him again. His attention was focused upon the victor, the biggest bay lynx that he had ever seen, facing him across the glade, its yellow eyes glaring amazement, hate and fear, its wide bearded face rendered almost demoniacal by the implacable fierceness of those eyes and by the savage snarl which revealed long teeth gleaming white in reddened jaws, teeth curved and thin like the teeth of a vampire. For a moment the boy stood spellbound, not with fear—for he knew the

bay lynx too well to anticipate an assault even in the case of so huge a lynx as this one—but with astonishment at the size of the beast and at the ferocity of its aspect. Then suddenly he was aware of something else even more astonishing.

This lynx had but one ear. There was no doubt about it, for the light was now strong enough to show him every detail of the creature. Yet the fact was so amazing to the boy that in his eagerness to verify it he forgot even the hideous beauty of those savage unwinking eyes which at first had held his gaze as though there lurked in the greenish-yellow depths of them some strange power akin to hypnotism. Completely satisfied at last, he did a queer thing, queer almost to madness. He got down very slowly from the log on the side nearest the lynx, taking care to make no sudden movement, and stretched himself on his back in the short grass within a dozen feet of the crouching animal. Then clasping his hands under his head he said, "Come on, Byng."

No sooner were the words uttered than he regretted his rashness. He could no longer see the lynx, but there flashed into his mind a vision of those long vampirelike fangs and those relentless eyes. His body quivered as he strained to catch the faintest sound, and at once he was sure that he heard, despite the thumping of his heart, stealthy

footfalls slowly drawing nearer. A cold sweat chilled him; for a moment he was on the point of leaping to his feet. Yet, having begun his experiment, he was game enough to see it through, and once again he said calmly, "Come on, Byng."

For perhaps half a minute more he lay still, fearing rather than hoping that his experiment would succeed. Then, slowly and still lying on his back, he turned his head.

The glade was empty.

The boy walked home through copper-splashed autumn woods and open savannahs of waving broom grass which with all their glory of gold and purple blooms could not keep his thoughts from returning again and again to the strange thing that had happened that morning. It was the strangest thing in all his experience, a thing the beginnings of which went back two years or more to those last days of his on the plantation before, in an evil moment, he had been persuaded to accept the offer of a former schoolmate in the North, whose father, a wealthy manufacturer, had gladly agreed to make an opening in his office for his son's closest friend. The plan had failed dismally. After many months of unhappiness in the rush and tumult of a great city, the boy, a planter born and bred, had given up a

fight not only hopeless but mistaken; and now he was back again amid the scenes that he loved and in the country that was his own—that wild and beautiful Low Country which in the old days had been the domain of the great rice planters, a country of great woods, deep swamps, wide marshes, secret secluded lagoons and many winding rivers.

He had come back to it with a joy that was almost ecstatic, longing for the sight of the gray weather-worn plantation house amid its moss-tapestried live oaks, for the sight and the sound of the happy Low Country black folk scarcely changed by all that had happened since the rattle of musketry and the roar of cannon startled the herons from the rice fields in the '60's; longing for the ample sweep of the river marshes and the grateful silences of the cypress swamps; longing most of all, perhaps, for the companionship of the abundant wild folk of the Low Country woods and waters, the deer and the tall bronze wild turkeys, the gleaming white herons and the fantastic long-shanked wood ibises, the vast fleets of ducks that covered the rice fields in winter, the innumerable hosts of singing birds that came with the spring.

In only one important respect had his long absence from these familiar scenes changed the boy. In the old days he had been an inveterate hunter. He now realized that though he was still a hunter

the lust of killing had gone out of him. He would not throw away his gun, a gun scarred with notches each one of which told a memorable tale of a buck or a gobbler; but he knew that now he would often forget to carry it with him when he went into the woods. For in those last weary months of his exile he had missed the wild folk not as game but as friends.

He had not carried it with him when, only two or three nights after his return to the plantation, he had gone out into the moonlit woods shortly before midnight to wait and watch until dawn at a certain spot which had been a favorite resort of his because it was a favorite resort of the wild folk also. He wanted no gun that night because his desire was not to kill, but to renew old acquaintanceships—to catch a glimpse, if luck favored him, of some of the wild creatures that move by night. He had been lucky beyond his highest hopes and he felt that the woods gods had prepared a special welcome for him upon his home-coming, showing him a wide-antlered buck and a doe, his wily old friend the coon, and, as a thrilling climax, a battle of lynxes, a rare sight which very few have ever witnessed. And even all this had not contented the gracious woods gods. They had so arranged matters that one of the battling lynxes should be a giant lynx with only one ear and that he should view this one-eared lynx from

behind a certain big pine log where once upon a time a strange thing had happened.

The boy's thoughts returned to that event of nearly three years before. Guests were expected at the plantation. His mother's ideas of hospitality required a wild turkey for the occasion, and he went out to try to get one. Before dawn he took his station behind the big pine log at a point where a low evergreen bush afforded additional concealment. At day-clean, as the Low Country woodsmen term the full dawn, he began calling. With his lips pressed against the bowl of an old brier pipe he could make sounds which only the wiliest of the long-bearded old gobblers could recognize as counterfeit. He called three or four times, waited a few minutes, then called again. It was just the hour when the turkeys should be coming down from the tall trees deep in the swamps to feed, and the boy listened eagerly for an answer to his summons.

Presently he heard a faint sound which, however, was certainly not made by a turkey. It came, he thought, from the reeds fringing the little canebrake at the edge of the glade, and he concluded that it was probably only a marsh rabbit. Sitting on the ground behind the log, his gun within easy reach of his right hand, he continued calling at intervals, using all his art, trying all the tricks of tone and of timbre which experience had taught him.

Suddenly he heard again that queer faint sound, this time close at hand and directly in front of him, just beyond the log and behind the evergreen bush. Leaning forward to look over the log, he found himself gazing straight into the glowing eyes of a lynx, crouched, poised, taut for the spring, almost in the very act of springing.

For a fraction of a minute neither boy nor wildcat stirred. Then, as the boy's hand shot towards his gun, the lynx sprang straight at him. Poised as she was, her mind and her muscles keyed up for her final leap upon the supposed turkey behind the log the moment the bird moved, she could not re-adjust herself upon the instant to the astounding discovery that this turkey which she had been stalking was a man.

The boy's quickness saved him from serious injury. He ducked like a flash, and the flying lynx passed between his face and his right hand gripping the gun, one hind claw scratching his knuckles as she passed. She struck the ground running, a brown streak flashing towards the cover of a dense thicket thirty yards away, and the boy was rather surprised when the load of turkey shot which went crashing after her bowled her over like a rabbit.

He was a little regretful when he found that she was a nursing mother, and his conscience compelled him to make a search for the kittens. He found

them an hour or so later, after he had gone back to the plantation house and returned with his big black-and-tan hound, but the dog killed two of the three before the boy could get to them. The third owed its life to the fact that, baby though it was, it made a brave fight against its huge foe. It was badly chewed about the head and ears and was covered with blood when the boy pulled the dog out of the lynx den in a great hollow oak stump and rescued the sole survivor of the family; but it was still full of fight as he wrapped it in his hunting coat, and once or twice during the walk back to the plantation house it made its claws felt even through that thick covering.

As soon as its wounds had healed, the striped and spotted bobtailed kitten thrived amazingly. From a diet of milk it passed with evident relish to a diet of meat, and by the time it was three months old its size and strength already proved it to be an exceptional specimen of its kind. The boy kept it in a large wire-covered inclosure in the yard under a wide-spreading live oak and fed it himself with the greatest care. He knew that the bay lynx, or wildcat, is not easily tamed and that even when taken very young its savage instincts are always close to the surface. But the boy had a way of his own with animals, and although the young lynx hated and feared all the other members of the family and all

the plantation hands, it soon conceived a real affection for its master. Sometimes, when the plantation dogs were absent, he would let it out of its pen and the two would play games about the yard—games which often ended with the boy taking a nap under a tree, lying flat on his back in the shade, his head resting on his clasped hands. At such times the little lynx invariably jumped upon his big playmate's chest and, curling himself up, dozed there in great content, growling viciously at anyone who approached.

When the boy went North to begin his business career this comradeship ended. There was no one to whom the lynx, now more than half grown, could be given, for its dislike of all other human beings had become more intense as it grew older. Once when the boy had taken his pet with him to a wooded hollow near the house the lynx had gone bounding off after a rabbit. He had remained away nearly two hours and upon his return had shown for the first time in his life a certain coldness towards his master. This had worn off presently, but the boy understood its significance and remembered it.

As the time for his departure drew near he took the lynx again and again into the woods and thicket-bordered fields and generally managed to start a rabbit. Longer and longer grew the lynx's ab-

sences, and once he stayed in the woods all night. The next afternoon, an hour before sunset, the boy, feeling rather sad about it, prepared to make an end.

This time he went with the lynx far into the deep woods, three miles or more from the plantation house, at the edge of a great swamp; and this time he took his gun with him.

He walked, with his velvet-footed companion at his heels, along the margin of a reed-grown lagoon until a short-eared, short-legged marsh rabbit, slow and clumsy compared with a cottontail, jumped up in front of him, and the long-limbed, lanky wildcat went bounding away, gaining upon the fugitive at every leap. The boy waited a half minute, raised his gun and fired first one barrel, then the other. Reloading hurriedly, he fired two more shots, conscious of a certain pang as he recalled the frantic terror with which the discharge of a gun always inspired the lynx.

“Good-by, Byng,” he said, with a touch of sentimentality by no means foreign to his nature. “If I ever see you again I’ll know you. But I guess it’s good-by forever.”

But the woods gods ruled otherwise. After more than two years they had brought the boy and Byng together again. There was no doubt in the boy’s

mind as to the identity of the great one-eared lynx that had fought the battle in the glade. That missing ear was a convincing identification mark. The black-and-tan hound, which had found the lynx kittens in the hollow oak stump and killed two of them, had mangled the right ear of the third so badly that, as soon as the boy reached the plantation house with his captive, he had clipped away the ragged and bloody remnants of that ear with a pair of sharp scissors.

In this way Byng was marked for life, and marked unmistakably, while, in addition, his great size would render him easily recognizable. As the boy, still thrilling with the strangeness of that dramatic meeting in the glade, walked homeward through the painted autumn woods and the yellowing broom-grass fields where nodding plumes of goldenrod shone in the morning light, he felt that for Byng and himself the woods gods had still other adventures in store.

That fall and winter were a busy time for the boy. He had taken over the management of the plantation and he worked hard. Yet, insatiable woodsman that he was, he contrived to spend part of nearly every day in the woods; and always he was on the lookout for the one-eared lynx, who was, he knew, the ruler of all the wild folk of those woods except the big, arrogant whitetail bucks, who

feared none of the other wild four-foots, barring only the black bears when at rare intervals they passed through on their journeys from one of the great swamps to another, and the long armored alligators who were the masters of the rivers and lagoons.

But not once that winter did the boy see Byng, though several times he saw his handiwork. Sometimes it was a smooth-barked sapling scratched and scarred where a tall beast had reared on its hind legs and sharpened the claws of its front feet. Sometimes it was the scanty remnant of a rabbit devoured hide and all, and in the sand near by great rounded tracks nearly twice as large as those of the average wildcat. Occasionally, too, the boy had a feeling that he was being watched and followed. All his skill at woodcraft, however, failed to confirm this suspicion, and finally he decided that his imagination was playing him tricks and he determined to put Byng out of his mind.

It was otherwise with Byng. He could not put the boy out of his mind because the boy was forever crossing his path. The big lynx had a definite range marked by two rivers, neither of which he ever attempted to cross because, in the first place, he was not much of a swimmer, and, in the second place, alligators lived in them. The plantation house was situated midway between these rivers,

the center of some five thousand acres of forest, savannah and swamp. This was the lynx's hunting ground, a hunting ground abounding in bird and animal life and especially rich in quail and rabbits, both swamp rabbits and cottontails. Here food was plentiful and was easily obtained; even in the first weeks of his freedom he had found little difficulty, thanks to his inherited woodcraft, in picking up a living. And here he was fairly safe.

Few poachers invaded these woods, and during the boy's absence in the North little hunting had been done there. Sometimes at night Byng heard or saw negro possum and coon hunters, but these gave him little anxiety. Twice, however, he encountered a more serious problem when Sandy Jim Mayfield followed his pack of long lean deer hounds, hot on the trail of buck or doe, into the one-eared lynx's territory. As luck would have it, on each of these occasions the pack crossed Byng's trail, and it might have fared ill with him had not these dogs been trained so well by Sandy Jim to disregard all the other scents of the woods when they were on the track of a deer.

As it was, Byng had one close call. Sandy Jim, sitting on his wiry little mare in a narrow woods road, listening to the music of his hounds and holding his gun at his shoulder for a quick shot, saw a long brown shape flash across the opening in front

of him. He fired, then cursed himself not only for missing the lynx but for firing at all. The empty cartridge jammed in the breech of his single-barreled gun, and before he could pry it out the buck which his dogs had been trailing walked across the road with a nonchalance and deliberateness which would have sealed his doom had the old hunter been ready for him.

Sandy Jim did not know it, but he had not missed altogether. One buckshot had plowed a furrow across Byng's back just above the haunches. The wound was nothing. It healed within a week. But for months afterwards Byng's hair bristled whenever his thoughts went back to that experience.

The big lynx did not need this lesson to teach him the fear of man. That fear he already had, by inheritance, and it was implanted deep in his being. But his encounter with Sandy Jim sharpened and intensified his dread of the whole human species and helped to repress and nullify the strange promptings which came to him always when his path happened to cross that of the boy.

At that first meeting in the glade he had recognized the latter instantly, and a flood of memories had swept into his brain as the boy lay down in front of him and called to him in the old forgotten way. For a few moments conflicting forces in his nature had struggled for the mastery; but the

influence of unnumbered generations of man-fearing and man-hating ancestors had triumphed in the end. Swiftly he had slunk away into the thicket, trembling, hating, fearing, yet remembering and loving; and always thereafter, when he saw or scented the boy in the woods, these memories—like faint whisperings or dim cloudy picturings in his brain—came back to him. But they never conquered his fear or led him to approach very close to the boy. Even when, as happened upon more than one occasion, he came upon the boy taking a nap in the woods, the lynx kept his distance, watching from some dense covert until the sleeper rose and went his way.

Thus the winter passed and presently it was spring in the Low Country; for the boy a season of delight because of the immeasurable beauty of it and the wonderful birds that it brought—the tall white egrets, the high-soaring ibises, the fantastic anhingas, or water turkeys, the painted blue-and-green-and-crimson nonpareils, and all the other gay-plumaged makers of music who came up from the tropics with the warm weather. He seldom thought of Byng now on his rambles because there were so many other things of absorbing interest to occupy his mind.

Then, early one May morning, when the boy dis-

covered a newly born fawn curled up under a myrtle bush and concealed himself near by to await the return of the fawn's mother, the woods gods intervened again.

Three hundred yards up the wind from the spot where the fawn lay motionless on the soft bed of leaves where its mother had left it, a tall wild gobbler was getting his breakfast. The forest was open and parklike here, a mixture of pines and oaks with no underbrush to speak of; and Byng, who had acquired a decided taste for turkey, was studying the situation from the shelter of an oak trunk a hundred feet or so to the gobbler's left.

To stalk the wary old bird under such unfavorable conditions he knew to be impossible. After some minutes' consideration he had almost made up his mind to leave the gobbler in peace, for he realized that this might be a rather protracted affair, and it was not his custom to hunt by day. But at that moment the gobbler, having exhausted the foraging possibilities of that immediate locality, began to stride away through the woods, and it flashed into Byng's mind that he knew where the big bird was going and that there was an excellent chance of ambushing him on the way. Making a wide circle so as to avoid all danger of detection, he set off to post himself at a point in the gobbler's path where a lucky leap might result in a kill.

He had almost gained the spot that he had in mind when he halted suddenly. Though a far less efficient organ than the nose of a fox, his nose was of some value to him in hunting, and it had brought him tidings of sweet tender meat near at hand. Swerving sharply, he crept forward very slowly, inch by inch, his cushioned feet making no sound. Presently he stopped close to a myrtle bush, feasted his fierce eyes for a moment upon a spotted, gently breathing thing underneath it, then searched carefully the opening beyond the bush. Next moment he leaped upon the fawn and buried his long fangs in the little creature's throat.

The boy, watching from his place of concealment fifteen yards away behind a log, saw the murder and sprang to his feet with a shout. Nothing in the wild life of the woods moved him more than the love of a doe for her little one. Several times the rare privilege had been accorded him of witnessing this mother love, and he had waited patiently behind his log, anticipating eagerly the moment when the mother, called away by some urgent business of her own, would return. His gaze was resting on the fawn, as motionless as though it were fast asleep, though its big eyes were wide and alert, when, without the slightest warning, the great lynx burst through the leafy screen behind it and tore its throat open.

The boy had been idly whittling a stick. As he leaped over the log and rushed to the fawn's rescue, his eyes blazing with fury, he flourished the big knife in his right hand and shifted his grip upon its handle. To his surprise the lynx, crouching upon its victim, remained motionless, teeth bared in an ugly snarl, blood dripping from its jaws. For a moment the boy believed that he was in for a battle, and in the rage that possessed him the prospect filled him with fierce joy. But as a matter of fact it was sheer amazement that paralyzed the lynx temporarily, and when the boy was still ten feet from him he recovered his wits. He bounded three feet to the right, and as though made of India rubber, bounced thence to the edge of the thicket. Whirling in mid-career, the boy hurled the knife at him as he vanished amid the foliage.

Two minutes later the fawn died in the boy's arms, gazing up into his face with large, crystalline, stricken eyes full of vague, questioning wonder. As the light went out of them the boy vowed unceasing relentless war against the murderer. To him the one-eared lynx was no longer Byng, the playful, affectionate, striped-and-spotted kitten of other days. He was the savage, bloody-toothed slaughterer of innocent woods babies. The boy, who had to have a name for everything, renamed him Lynx

Lucifer; and thenceforward there was a price upon his head.

When the boy picked up his knife after a short search in the thicket where he had thrown it, he was glad to note that there was blood on the blade.

Byng, roaming his woods as usual and, as always, more or less on the lookout for the boy, of course knew nothing of the great change that had come about. He could not know that a dollar had been offered to any negro on the plantation who would bring in the body of a big wildcat with only one ear. Nor could he know that the boy had ridden over to the house of Sandy Jim Mayfield, his nearest white neighbor, to learn whether he had a dog in his deer pack that would follow the trail of a cat and to give him leave to hunt wildcats in the plantation woods. Byng was conscious of no resentment over the boy's sudden attack upon him, and the flesh wound where the knife had struck him on one hind quarter was too slight to cause serious annoyance. When, two mornings afterwards, he heard the boy in the woods, he left his sleeping place in a tangled, almost impenetrable thicket of thorny vines and moved swiftly towards the sounds. For a half mile or so he followed the boy, catching a glimpse of him now and then, sensible of those same strange promptings born of the old comradeship, never sus-

pecting the reason why this time the boy carried his gun.

On the fifth night after the killing of the fawn Byng did something that he had never done before. Always up to that time a wholesome respect for Sandy Jim's dogs had caused him to avoid the vicinity of the woodsman's house; but on this night he happened to take a short cut which led him within a hundred feet of Mayfield's fence and, perhaps because the night was an especially black one and no dogs seemed to be about, he was encouraged to explore the premises.

The blackness meant nothing to Byng. His luminous eyes were made for such nights, and when a slight noise caused him to glance upward he recognized instantly the five big bulky objects fifteen feet or so above him on a limb of a large leaning mulberry tree. He passed like a ghost up the slanting trunk of the tree, fastened himself upon the nearest turkey hen, and leaped with it to the ground. The turkey was too heavy to be carried far. Within a half mile he stopped, feasted to his heart's content, then buried the rest of the carcass and scratched dead leaves over the spot.

The boy was writing a letter in the plantation-house library when he saw Sandy Jim Mayfield

galloping up the long avenue of live oaks leading to the house. He greeted his visitor cordially; for if it was true that Sandy Jim sometimes followed upon the plantation lands a deer which his pack had jumped, it was true also that his woodcraft was of that rare quality which the boy always admired wherever he found it. If a man were a good enough woodsman the boy would forgive him most of his sins; and so, although there was much about the lean, stoop-shouldered, white-mustached swamp ranger that was far from admirable, the boy and he were friends after a fashion.

The old woodsman, lithe as an otter in spite of his seventy years, drew up his clay-bank mare in front of the white-pillared portico and declined an invitation to dismount and come in.

“Remember that big wildcat you was after killin’?” he drawled.

The boy nodded.

“You kin kill him today if you want to.”

“How’s that?” asked the boy.

“Night before last he stole one o’ my turkeys an’ buried the carkiss in the woods a half mile from my house. I found the place an’ set traps all round it. Las’ night he come back to finish eatin’ the carkiss an’ one o’ the traps got him. But he yanked the trap loose an’ carried it with him. Must be a powerful brute.”

Sandy Jim paused to shift his quid.

"Why didn't you trail him?" the boy asked.

"Couldn't. My old woman's took another sick spell. Got to hustle to town this mornin' an' git some o' them heart drops. Gabe's off seein' his gal, an' the boys are gone with the pack on a hunt over in Big Cypress where there ain't no chance o' runnin' into one o' them game wardens. But the Airdale's at the house, an' he trails a cat pretty good. You kin take him an' have that cat's hide in a couple o' hours. He can't go fur with that steel trap a'-hangin' on his forefoot."

Terror and agony such as he had never before known were driving Byng almost mad in the woods. He had traveled farther than Sandy Jim had thought possible. The trap gripping his left foreleg was not a very large one, and the big lynx, spurred on by a frenzy of pain and fear, was able to make fairly good headway on three legs, half-lifting, half-dragging the cold terrible unknown thing which clutched and paralyzed the fourth. But it was heartbreaking work and after an hour of it Byng was utterly exhausted.

He lay down, flanks heaving, eyes glaring, head lolling on his shoulders. Presently, when he had got his wind back, he bit savagely at the hard steel,

then staggered to his feet again and pulled and tugged, jerking the trap this way and that. The pain was less severe now, because the leg had grown numb, but he was wilder than ever with terror. Blindly, with no idea of where he was going and no sense of direction, he started off again through the woods.

It was nearly midday when he heard the Airedale coming. The dog was really half Airedale, half hound, a huge, light-brown, shaggy creature, ill-tempered and powerful, the undisputed master of Sandy Jim's pack. Byng knew him and instantly recognized his voice, a short sharp yelping very different from the resonant voice of a hound. The hair bristled along the lynx's back and his curved claws unsheathed themselves, then withdrew into their scabbards.

Yet in the presence of this new danger he did not give way to panic. For two hours he had been lying quietly in the midst of a small thicket of arundinaria cane, deep in a lonely pine wood. The pain had gone out of his leg, which was now completely benumbed, and the stillness and seclusion of the spot had served to steady his nerves. Resting thus, his strength, so nearly spent in his frenzied and laborious progress through the woods, had slowly come back to him, and as his strength returned the mad terror gradually subsided. At the first sound of the

Airedale's voice his wits went to work to meet the new emergency.

He saw no tree near him that he could climb. With only three good legs he could never drag himself and the trap up the straight trunk of one of those giant pines. A hundred yards away the pine wood thinned and sloped down to a deep hollow, where a backwater from a small creek had made a little swamp densely grown with young sweet gums. Byng hated to leave the cover of the cane thicket, but if he could reach this swamp in time the many small pools of water might baffle the trailing dog.

At once he set out and had traveled fifty yards from the edge of the canes, when the trap caught on a snag in the sparse grass under the scattered trees, resisting all his efforts to jerk it loose. For five minutes he struggled vainly to free himself, while the yelping of the dog drew steadily nearer. Then, just as the snag broke at last, throwing him backward in a heap, he saw the tall form of the boy striding amid the tree trunks.

Somehow, as a reflex of the strange subtle emotions which always rose in him when he saw or scented the boy, the sight brought him reassurance. He had thought that it was Sandy Jim who was ranging the woods with his dog; but instead it was the one human being for whom his heart held some-

thing else than fear and hate, the human being who was a part of those shadowy recollections that sometimes hovered in the background of his mind as he dozed away the daylight hours in some one of his many secret sleeping places. Again the panic, which had been swelling in him like a tide, halted and began to recede. He crouched low, his eyes fixed upon the boy, knowing that in those open woods the moment he moved he would be seen, still fearing discovery, though now discovery had been robbed of half its terrors.

The boy, holding the straining Airedale in leash, his gun balanced in his left hand, was heading straight for the cane thicket. So hot was the scent that at any moment he expected to come upon the lynx, and his eyes were searching the woods ahead of him. Near the edge of the canes, however, the scream of a red-shouldered hawk circling above the sweet-gum swamp to the right caused him to glance in that direction, and in a moment he saw the tawny form of the lynx in full view, standing out conspicuously against the green carpet of the thinly wooded savanna. Releasing his hold upon the leash, he let the dog plunge into the canes on the hot trail, while he himself turned at right angles and walked swiftly towards the lynx, holding his gun ready.

At a distance of ten paces he halted. The big cat had moved not a muscle, uttered not a sound. But

for its bristling hair and its steady, unwinking eyes, he might have believed it dead as it lay there in front of him, its one ear pricked forward, its round bearded face pillowed on its forepaws, to one of which the steel trap still clung.

The boy muttered an exclamation of impatience. It was his own weakness which provoked him—the sentimental weakness which had caused him to see for an instant in that round bearded face the face of the striped-and-spotted lynx kitten which used to curl itself up on his chest when he lay down for a nap under the plantation trees—the face of Byng, his playmate, and not the fiendish face of Lynx Lucifer, murderer of little fawns. He raised his gun and took careful aim, drawing a bead upon the furry forehead between the unwinking eyes.

Coming from behind, in long leaps that made no sound as his big paws pounded the springy turf, the Airedale flashed past him, a long-drawn streak of yellowish brown that almost brushed his elbow as it shot by. So startled was the boy that, in the very act of pulling trigger, he jumped aside, and the load of buckshot dug a hole in the ground three feet from the squirming, writhing mass in front of him where dog and lynx heaved and strained in deadly embrace. A half minute the boy stood irresolute,

watching the battle. Then he hurriedly laid down his gun, useless now because he could not shoot one combatant without hitting the other, and made a leap for the end of the Airedale's leash, switching and jumping about over the ground like a black serpent engaged in some strange dance.

Sandy Jim's last word to him had been an earnest injunction not to let the dog come to close quarters with the lynx. Knowing his dog's fierce and indomitable spirit and aware also that the lynx was an extraordinarily large and powerful specimen, Mayfield realized that, though the Airedale might win in the end, the victory would be dearly bought. So tough is a lynx's skin, especially about the region of the throat, that a dog's teeth can tear it only with great difficulty, and in most single combats the dog wins, if he wins at all, by dint of the throttling pressure of his jaws constricting his foe's windpipe. This is likely to be a comparatively slow process, and in the meantime the dog may be slashed almost to ribbons by the lynx's long curved claws.

This was what was happening now. Again, as in that other battle in the glade at dawn, Byng was on his back, his enemy on top of him; and again his hind legs were working like steam piston rods, drawing blood at nearly every upward thrust. Badly hampered though he was by the trap clinging to his forepaw, he was fighting furiously and effectively

for his life; and even in the hurry and excitement of the moment the boy felt a thrill of admiration for the lithe, steel-sinewed beast that could make such a fight against such odds, and for the wild, fierce spirit that would not give up so long as breath remained in the body that incased it.

But that breath was growing shorter. The big Airedale had his grip now. His great jaws were clamped upon the lynx's throat just where it left the chest, clamped with a vicelike grip which all the mad struggles of his enemy, heaving and writhing underneath him, could not shake loose; and the boy knew that they would remain fastened there till life went out of the lynx or till the dog, now streaming with blood from his lacerated under parts, was disemboweled.

The boy feared the latter ending. Abandoning his efforts to seize the elusive leash and disregarding the danger of injury to himself, he jumped close in and managed at last to get his hand under the Airedale's collar. Then, straining and stumbling, putting all his strength into the effort, he finally succeeded in pulling the dog clear. As the long, square jaws lost their hold the lynx, which had been lifted a little from the ground, fell back limp and helpless and lay still.

The boy tied the struggling dog to a sapling twenty feet away and left him there plunging and

rearing at the end of the stout leather leash. The lynx, hideously besmeared with blood, still lay on its side as if dead; but the yellow eyes were open and it still breathed, the breath coming in quick gasps. The boy moved towards his gun lying in the grass, breeched it, and slipped a shell into the empty barrel. When he turned towards the lynx again he saw that it had moved its head slightly and that the eyes were fixed upon him, steady, unwinking, unafraid.

A long time the boy looked into the translucent depths of them, his gun half raised to his shoulder. He was not happy. Suddenly the thought came to him that this was a cowardly business and a shoddy victory, this victory that he had won over Byng—it was Byng that he thought of now, not Lynx Lucifer—hampered and crippled by the steel trap clinging to his forefoot, Byng who had fought so magnificently an utterly hopeless fight. He lowered the gun and laid it on the grass, then stooped beside the lynx.

Watching the yellow eyes narrowly, though he believed that the animal was too weak to use tooth or claw, he felt the skin of its throat and chest. It was as Mayfield had said; the hide was not torn; all the blood of that bloody battle had come from the dog. Still watching those eyes, and alert to withdraw his hand quickly at the first hostile move,

he took the left foreleg in his hand, testing it with deft fingers. No bones were broken. Bearing down upon the trap with his knees, he drew it off as the steel jaws opened, and tossed it behind him.

Then he stepped back five paces and sat down in the grass.

For five minutes, perhaps, the lynx lay still. It had been very close to death and its strength came back very slowly. Gradually, however, its breathing became more regular and presently it raised its head slowly and weakly, then struggled to its feet.

A half minute it stood, swaying precariously, head hanging low, eyes still fixed on the boy's face. There was no fierceness in them: but the whiskered jaws were still red with the Airedale's blood, and instantly the boy's mind went back to the murdered fawn. His hand stole towards his gun, but stopped halfway.

"Good-by again, Lynx Lucifer," he said. "Don't ever let me get another sight of you along a gun barrel."

As though roused by the words, Byng turned and tottered on three legs across the savannah towards the friendly green coverts of the sweet-gum swamp.

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